

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Gillian Armstrong (1950-)

LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Gillian Armstrong was born in 1950 and raised in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia. While studying directing at the newly established Australian Film and Television School, she made several much-lauded short films. With Peter Weir, Armstrong was one of the first Australian directors to be recognized internationally, beginning with her first feature film, *My Brilliant Career* (1979), which competed at Cannes. Armstrong went on to make other films in Australia (including *Starstruck* [1982], *High Tide* [1987], *Oscar and Lucinda* [1997], and several documentaries) and in Hollywood (including *Mrs. Soffel* [1985] and *Little Women* [1994]). Internationally acclaimed throughout her career, Armstrong has won numerous awards in Australia and abroad. She was nominated for the Australian Film Institute's Best Director award three times, winning for *My Brilliant Career*. Her films screened at festivals all over the world, including Cannes and Berlin.



FILMOGRAPHY

My Brilliant Career (1979)
Starstruck (1982)
Mrs. Soffel (1984)
High Tide (1987)
Fires Within (1991)
The Last Days of Chez Nous (1992)

Little Women (1994)
Oscar and Lucinda (1997)
Charlotte Gray (2001)
Death Defying Acts (2007)

THEMES

Social Class

My Brilliant Career Sybylla struggles with a complex social status. While her parents are poor, her mother comes from a wealthy family. When Sybylla goes to Caddagat, it is clear that she has been there before. Her childhood, then, has been marked by the contrast between her mother's original circumstances and the family's current circumstances. Sybylla clearly feels more kinship with the upper-class branch of the family, insisting on playing the piano and writing even as there are chores to be done. She is delighted when she receives the invitation to stay with her grandmother at Caddagat. Her grandmother and Aunt Helen immediately begin to make plans to buy her some new dresses that will better fit the company she will be keeping at Caddagat. After Sybylla meets and falls in love with Harry, she tells Helen she is well aware that Harry would never marry her because of her social status. This turns out to be incorrect, however: Harry does propose to her. But Sybylla, ironically, decides that the best place to focus on her writing actually is her parents' house, even though she must share a bedroom and do chores there. Poverty demands less of her time than marriage would.

Illustrative moment: Early in the film, Sybylla's parents lie in bed at night discussing what to do with her, given that they think they cannot afford to "keep" her forever, but she has refused to work as a servant. Sybylla's father remarks, "She's like your whole damn family: delusions of grandeur." In other words, he attributes Sybylla's behavior to the social class background of her mother.

Starstruck Jackie and Angus's family is decidedly working class. When Jackie and Angus speak triumphantly about Jackie's performance at the Lizard Lounge early in the film, Pearl simply tells Jackie to

get to work at the pub, telling her that one singing performance will not change “who you are, or what you are.” The Mullens family’s whole life is built around their attempt to keep the Harbour View pub afloat; instead of having any paid employees, they simply all take turns working at the pub under Pearl’s direction. Angus and Jackie’s attempts to further her singing career are all very DIY, mostly involving homemade costumes and publicity stunts that cost very little money to stage. Other characters in the film are mostly working class as well. The Wombats drive a rickety van and tell Angus that they get two gigs per week if they are lucky. Even Terry Lambert shows no particular markers of high-class status, though, of course, it is through Terry that Jackie has an opportunity to transcend her working-class destiny. Terry represents the possibility of social mobility.

Illustrative moment: Angus overhears a man in a suit telling his mother that they will lose the pub if they cannot pay the rent they owe. The professional suit immediately distinguishes this man from the men Angus knows, who do not dress so formally. It also demonstrates the power this man has to dictate whether or not the Mullens family can keep their livelihood. Angus and Pearl both look very distressed in this moment because the family has no savings or other resources besides the pub. They are living close to the bone.

Little Women It is a prominent fact in the story that the Marches are poorer than they used to be. They travel in genteel circles in Concord; their wealthy neighbor Mr. Laurence has no objection to his grandson’s growing intimacy with them, and Meg gets invited to events hosted by wealthy families. But the Marches can no longer afford the clothes, accessories, and carriages that one needs to participate fully in these events. Meg, who as the eldest sister can best remember the days of the family’s greater prosperity, frequently remarks on how difficult she finds it to be poor. The Laurences are visibly rich; Laurie attends Harvard and later is allowed to lounge around Europe for an indefinite period of time. The Marches, however, are by no means the poorest people in Concord; under Marmee’s tutelage, they frequently undertake charitable ventures, often for the benefit of destitute German immigrant families. Jo finds the whole notion of social class and money to be distasteful; “I hate money,” she says, meaning that she hates having to think about it. Jo and Meg both begin to work for a living as teenagers. Amy, at age twelve, declares an intention to marry a wealthy man.

Illustrative moment: Early in the film, Laurie and Mr. Laurence are about to climb into their carriage to go to church on Christmas morning. They see the March girls leaving their house bearing the breakfast that they intend to take to the Hummel family. The Laurences and the Marches—barely acquainted at this point—wave at each other. Mr. Laurence remarks to Laurie that the Marches were “once one of our finest families.” This line encapsulates both the Marches’ prior class status and the fact that they have, at least in Mr. Laurence’s eyes, lost it.

Death Defying Acts Social class is a defining feature in the lives of all the major characters in *Death Defying Acts*. We first see Mary and Benji walking out of a pawn shop, where Mary has pawned a ring. The constant basic struggle for survival is central to Mary and Benji’s lives; although they do not live in squalor, their financial situation is obviously precarious. They work all the time. Ultimately, the plot of the film is set in motion by the McGarvies’ need for money: they come into contact with Houdini because they are pursuing the \$10,000 prize for succeeding at the psychic trial. Meanwhile, Harry Houdini has changed his class position: born to a poor immigrant family in America, he has become immensely wealthy through hard work, luck, and fame. However, Harry clearly feels insecure and ambivalent when it comes to social class. He tries to tell Mary that he understands her poverty, and he seems genuinely more comfortable with her and Benji than with upper-class people. Harry’s tragedy—missing his mother’s death while giving a performance—encapsulates how torn he feels.

Illustrative moment: While discussing his upbringing with Mary, Harry explains that he used to share one bed with multiple siblings. This explanation pivots to nostalgia, though: Harry muses that he has never slept so well as he did when he was nine years old. He feels strange having a whole bed to himself so much of the time now.

Gender

My Brilliant Career Gender is among the most prominent themes of *My Brilliant Career*. The film is set during a period of strictly defined gender roles, with a stark division in the clothing, lifestyles, and

expected behavior of men and women. As a young woman, Sybylla is expected to marry and have children. She is not expected to have a career. Sybylla resents this expectation and persists in working toward a career in spite of it; she plays the piano, reads, and writes. While these activities are not treated as inherently unfeminine, the idea of pursuing them professionally certainly is. Importantly, Sybylla is not portrayed as a tomboy. She loves her new dresses at Caddagat and eagerly accepts a regime of hair and skin care. She wishes to be beautiful and cries about how “ugly” she is. Sybylla is also heterosexual and passionately loves Harry. Thus, Sybylla does not reject all aspects of conventional femininity—only the expectation of marriage and childbirth instead of career. The film therefore does not suggest that only totally unconventional women would ever question societal expectations for their futures. Instead, it demonstrates that any kind of woman might want something more than what society demands.

Illustrative moment: In order to caution her against marrying for love, Aunt Helen explains to Sybylla that her husband essentially ruined her life by abandoning her. He has left her “neither wife, nor widow, nor maiden.” This phrasing is telling, because it demonstrates that those are the only ways of defining a woman in this society. Now, Helen explains, she is adrift, living in her mother’s house and lying to people, saying that her husband is dead. Since her role in relation to a man is compromised and she has no children, society has nothing for her to do.

The Last Days of Chez Nous Although Gillian Armstrong has always resisted being pigeonholed as a feminist filmmaker, there is no question that her films attend to the experiences of women as whole people (not only as love interests for male heroes) in a way that her male peers’ films mostly do not. *The Last Days of Chez Nous* avoids gender essentialism: JP and Tim are very different, as are Beth and Vicki. Still, the film does suggest that men and women tend to face some different challenges. JP struggles to reconcile societal expectations of marriage with what he feels is a natural urge to be romantically involved with more than one woman. Meanwhile, Beth is struggling with feelings of betrayal because of JP’s affairs, as well as serious self-criticism. Interestingly, balancing marriage/parenthood and career does not seem to have been a major difficulty for Beth, as for many women. Vicki faces different female challenges, especially unwanted pregnancy. The film’s portrayal of Vicki’s experience contemplating and then getting an abortion was relatively daring for 1992; its portrayal of her regret at getting the procedure is daring in a different way, since feminist films more often champion the decision.

Illustrative moment: Beth stops for a quick visit with Sally on the way to a meeting with her publisher. Sally is pregnant. She remarks that Beth might consider getting her tubes untied in order to be able to have a baby with JP, which she says might help their marriage. We learn here both that Beth had her tubes tied in the first place, and that birthing a child is considered a way for a woman to “keep a man,” to put it crudely.

Little Women From its very title, *Little Women* styles itself as a tale not only of adolescence but of adolescent girlhood. The March girls’ upbringing and adult lives will, they know, be shaped by their gender, whether they like it or not. Their parents have tried to make gender matter as little as possible; for example, Marmee and the older girls do not wear corsets despite the prevailing convention, and Marmee comments to John Brooke that she has always believed that girls need exercise as much as boys do. Meg nevertheless takes some enjoyment in the trappings of girlhood, willingly dressing up in finery to attend balls when she can. But Jo frequently chafes against societal restrictions on girls’ behavior and actions. She expresses more than once that she desperately wishes she could go to college. She struggles to publish under her own feminine name (Josephine) because publishers assume that stories written by women are “fairy stories”; she has more success when she uses “Joseph.” The March girls dress up as men when they read aloud from the pretend newspaper that they all write together. The film clearly supports Jo’s view that restrictions based on gender are unfair.

Illustrative moment: When Meg returns from her friend’s “coming out” ball, she and Marmee and Jo discuss the double standard for men’s and women’s behavior. Meg asks Marmee why Laurie can drink and flirt without being judged for it, whereas Meg’s clothing and behavior are seen as legitimate objects of scrutiny. Marmee replies that it is simply because Laurie is a man.

Oscar and Lucinda Gender is a subtle theme throughout the film. When Lucinda’s parents have both died, an older couple (seemingly friends of the family) assert that she is supposed to live with them now, and that she will find it easy to make a good marriage because her fortune will be large when she

comes of age in a year. Lucinda weeps at this news. Although she does not articulate dismay at the proposition of marriage, it is telling that as soon as she comes of age, she leaves this couple, moves to Sydney by herself, purchases the Prince Rupert's Glassworks, and henceforth devotes most of her time to business. She does nothing that would be likely to lead to marriage. When she goes to Reverend Dennis for advice about glass, he is initially surprised to find that she is a woman interested in taking over a business. Still, partly thanks to her financial independence, Lucinda manages throughout the film to transcend 19th-century expectations about gender. Miriam Chadwick is not so lucky. Her behavior and the comments of her employer indicate that she is a widow looking to find another man to save her from being a governess; getting pregnant by Oscar, however, leads her not to marriage but to death in childbirth.

Illustrative moment: When an exhausted and disheveled Oscar arrives with the glass church, Reverend Dennis tells Miriam Chadwick to take him away and take care of him. She takes advantage of this situation by bathing him and then raping him. When he realizes what has happened, Oscar does indeed think to himself that he will have to marry her. Miriam's plan, though obviously unethical, is an attempt to leverage the only power she feels she has to improve her situation.

Relationships

Marriage

My Brilliant Career *My Brilliant Career* raises questions about marriage that apply to its own release time of the late 1970s as well as to the Victorian period it depicts. Coming out at the height of second-wave feminism, when more women were disputing the centrality of marriage to a woman's life, the film follows a heroine doing the same thing at a time when almost no one else was. For Sybylla, the downsides of marriage for a woman in the period are clear: ceding control over her own destiny to someone else, and becoming consumed by childbirth and childrearing. Her object lesson is her mother, who left an affluent and comfortable life to marry a poor man and is now constantly under the weight of many cares about money and her children's well-being. Later in the film, Sybylla meets a counterpoint in the person of Miss Augusta, Harry's aunt. Miss Augusta is unmarried, owns the Five Bob Downs estate, and spends her time pursuing her interests, including painting and maintaining an aviary of exotic birds. Sybylla is intrigued by this lifestyle, but Miss Augusta confesses to her that "loneliness is a terrible price to pay for independence." Avoiding marriage, it seems, does not guarantee happiness either.

Illustrative moment: After Harry first proposes to her, Miss Augusta finds Sybylla sitting alone and crying. Miss Augusta remarks that it seems clear that she loves Harry and that Harry loves her, so perhaps they should get married. Sybylla replies in frustration, "but why must it always come down to marriage?" This is the question of the film.

Mrs. Soffel The film portrays just one marriage: that of Peter and Kate Soffel. This marriage clearly leaves something to be desired, given that Kate leaves the marriage despite the substantial social stigma associated with such a decision in this period. The Soffels' marriage is very much a Victorian one: Peter is the undisputed head of the household, expecting his wishes to be respected. Although Kate never articulates any complaints about the marriage or about her responsibilities as a wife and mother, she is clearly suffering: at the beginning of the film she has been in bed for months for no clear medical reason, and halfway through the film she leaves home. Kate had married Peter at age 17, and the film suggests that if she ever loved him, she does not anymore. Romantic love with Ed Biddle—despite (or perhaps because of) its illicit nature—is more appealing to her than her marriage. For Peter, the marriage is all or nothing: once Kate has left, she can never come back. Yet the film also suggests that for Peter the marriage included love: he cries while going through Kate's belongings near the end of the film.

Illustrative moment: Peter is furious when he discovers that Kate has written a letter to the governor (subsequently published in the newspaper) asking for a review of the Biddles' case. The problem, he says, is not the stance itself but the fact that it jars with his role as a prison warden; he believes that the husband and wife are not supposed to have differing opinions. Kate, though, does not accept this criticism. They ultimately have different ideas about marriage.

Fires Within The one marriage seen in the film is that of Isabel and Nestor. This marriage is presented as many things: loving, conflict-filled, painful, life-giving, and able to endure separation and strife. For Nestor, the fact of marriage is all-powerful: he asserts his right to Isabel even though he has been absent from her life for years, and even though the last time he saw her he told her to forget him and go to another country. Things are more complicated for Isabel. The early years of her marriage to Nestor were difficult for her because of refusal to entertain her objections to his political activities. Moreover, she found in Sam a man who paid much more attention to her, and she spent years with him while not knowing whether she would ever see Nestor again. Ultimately, though, marriage is important to Isabel: she decides to say good-bye to Sam even though nothing has really happened to precipitate this decision. Subsequently, Nestor articulates a decision to abandon political activities and focus on his wife and daughter. With this decision, the film deems the marriage to be salvaged, and the tone of the film's ending is celebratory.

Illustrative moment: Nestor goes to Sam's fishing boat and confronts him there. He tells Sam to stay away from Isabel, and not to forget that Isabel is Nestor's wife. Sam counters that it seems like Nestor is the one who forgot that fact. Here, Nestor is prioritizing the fact of marriage, while Sam is prioritizing people's actions.

The Last Days of Chez Nous Marriage is a prominent theme in *The Last Days of Chez Nous*. Beth and JP's marriage anchors the story. Some other characters are married—Sally & Angelo and the parents of Vicki and Beth—but these marriages are not really explored. About Beth's first marriage, we know only that it divided her from her father, that it produced Annie, and that it came to an end. Beth and JP's marriage is a mixed bag. In some ways, they seem to enjoy each other's company a great deal and to share many things—for example, JP gives Beth feedback on her writing. On the other hand, they married in the first place because JP needed permission to remain in Australia, and the societal requirements of marriage weigh heavily on JP. For him, the expectation of marriage and faithfulness to one woman is difficult—essentially impossible—to live up to. His affairs cause tension with Beth and hurt her deeply. He expresses envy of men who live in cultures that permit having two wives, and he insists that he could love Beth better if he had a second wife. Beth does not share any of these opinions, so their marriage comes to an end.

Illustrative moment: Beth and JP walk home carrying bags of groceries. They discuss various matters. JP complains about Vicki's neediness. Beth discusses her hopes for her upcoming road trip with her father. When a younger female acquaintance of JP's comes up in the conversation, Beth makes a joke about sexuality between them, and JP half-jokingly confirms it. They start hitting each other with grocery bags playfully, but then they begin to hit each other a little harder and to appear distressed. This one short scene depicts a range of things that happen between married people: sharing household chores, discussing family matters, joking together, and fighting.

Parenthood

Mrs. Soffel Kate and Peter Soffel both grapple with their duties as parents over the course of the film. At the beginning of the film, Kate has been essentially unavailable to her children during a long illness. She becomes unavailable to them again when she leaves the family home in order to run away with Ed and Jack Biddle; this time, her defection from the family is permanent because Peter will not let the children see her again when she comes back. Kate treats her children affectionately when she is around them, and she attends to their practical and spiritual welfare by encouraging them to say their prayers, making them go to bed when it is late, and so forth. Kate never visibly chafes against parenthood; however, she obviously does not see it as the number one factor in her life. Peter, meanwhile, sees his role as a parent consisting primarily of managing his children's behavior and morality. He gives the younger children a talking-to for running around out of bounds in one of the film's first scenes, and in the end, he would rather have them motherless than risk what he sees as the moral contamination of Kate. Whereas parenthood seems more fun for Kate than for Peter, she is the one who is willing to give it up.

Illustrative moment: One night early in the film, Kate goes into her daughters' room and finds her younger daughter, Margaret, under the bed with a candle and a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings about the Biddle case. Kate listens as Margaret animatedly explains why she believes the Biddles are innocent. Then, Kate persuades Margaret to go to bed; she tucks her in, and they say a prayer together.

Hide Tide Regarding parenthood, the film's most prominent theme, *High Tide* raises several difficult questions. Who has the greater "right" to the child: a biological parent, or someone else who cared for the child for over a decade? Is a child better off with someone more responsible, or with someone to whom they feel more connected emotionally? Can a parent who abandoned their child be forgiven? *High Tide* is reminiscent of classic Hollywood maternal melodramas like *Stella Dallas* (1937) in its focus on a mother who gave up a child in the past and now must decide whether and how much to reinsert herself into the child's life. *High Tide* emphasizes that sometimes parenthood is simply too hard: Lilli gave Ally up when she felt unable to parent while overwhelmed by grief. The film does not judge Lilli for this, and she never says that she regrets this decision, even though she clearly wants Ally with her now. Bet, meanwhile, has raised Ally alone while grieving the death of her son. The film's final view of Bet crying as Ally and Lilli drive away is deeply sympathetic. Both Bet and Lilli love Ally and have legitimate claims. Ultimately, the film suggests that Ally's own wishes are most important.

Illustrative moment: A day or two after their first meeting, Ally and Lilli run into each other in the laundry room of the caravan park. Although they do not yet know that they are mother and daughter, they are happy to see each other and immediately discover things they have in common. Suddenly Bet appears and calls to Ally. When Bet and Lilli recognize each other, both of them immediately have a changed relationship to parenthood: Bet looks horrified and feels her "parenthood" to be threatened by Lilli's presence, while Lilli realizes that the daughter whose whereabouts she did not know is actually right in front of her, giving her the opportunity to choose to be a parent again.

Fires Within All three of the main adult characters in the film have some sort of parental relationship to Maribi. Isabel takes her role as a parent most seriously. As soon as she is born, Maribi is central to Isabel's decision-making. Isabel's disputes with Nestor all come down to what is best for Maribi; later, Isabel risks immigration and experiences privation and hard work to establish a good life for Maribi in the U.S. Sam, meanwhile, comes to love Maribi in addition to Isabel and adopts a somewhat parental attitude toward her; he has pictures of her in his home, and he picks her up from school and discusses her problems with her. Finally, Nestor is Maribi's father, and although he shows little interest in her in the flashback sequences, he bonds with her immediately after his release and becomes angry when he sees that Sam has stepped into a parental role in his absence. Like Armstrong's previous film, *High Tide*, *Fires Within* poses the question of who has the greater right to a child: the biological parent or the one who stepped in in that parent's absence. Both films portray the issue as complicated, and both end with the victory of the biological parent.

Illustrative moment: Sam goes to pick Maribi up from school. He takes her book bag for her and asks her what is wrong, seeing her glum face. Then, Nestor appears, sees Sam, and announces firmly that he has come to pick Maribi up from school. Maribi looks stricken at the sight of him and looks back and forth between the two men. Sam sighs and tells Maribi she can go with Nestor. He hands over her book bag.

The Last Days of Chez Nous Finding herself pregnant, Vicki contemplates the possibility of parenthood. She asks Beth to remind her of the arguments for and against abortion; Beth replies that to have a baby, you should really want one. Vicki, clearly, feels more torn than that. Yet she cries after the abortion and clearly regrets it, saying she thinks people pushed her. Meanwhile, Beth and Doug are the two main characters who are themselves parents. On TV one night, Beth, Doug, and Vicki all—separately—watch the same documentary portraying a woman giving birth. Vicki sobs; Beth tears up; Doug changes the channel to the cricket. Doug would rather not think about it. Beth may be recalling giving birth to Annie—an event she likely views with mixed feelings since she has a good relationship with her daughter but also had to deal with her father's disapproval of her marriage and refusal to visit baby Annie. Doug disapproves of many things Beth does; this relationship between a parent and an adult child is very troubled and constitutes one of the problems that Beth sets out to solve in the film. She is somewhat successful. Vicki is indifferent to her parents, saying they are too old to be interesting.

Illustrative moment: JP, having been a stepparent to Annie for several years, is sorry to leave her when he leaves Beth. When they say goodbye, both are teary. JP puts a hat on her head, evoking the game they used to play in which he would throw a hat toward her and she would try to get it to land on her head. This scene points to the wide reach of parenthood, beyond a biological relationship.

Family

Starstruck Family is central to the film and is embodied entirely by the Mullenses, since all other characters in the film are seen exclusively outside their family context. In many of the scenes that take place at the Harbour View, the entire Mullens family is present. Nana, Reg, Pearl, Jackie, and Angus all work at the pub and live in the out-of-use hotel rooms, so they are frequently together. In some ways, they are at odds; Jackie and Angus never want to do what the adults tell them to, and Pearl is cheating on Reg. Relationships in the family are neither abusive, on the one hand, nor emotionally close, on the other (with the exception of Jackie and Angus's very close friendship). That said, it is significant that Pearl and Reg have essentially adopted their nephew. In addition, the family becomes closer over the course of the film. Pearl's affair comes to an end, and the adults become more enthusiastic about Jackie's singing, eagerly watching her performances on Terry's show and the in New Year's Eve competition. Although Pearl usually talks to Angus only in order to tell him what to do, they have a tender moment later in the film in which Angus tries to comfort her following his father's disappearance with the money from the pub's safe. At the end of the film, everyone in the family is united in celebrating Jackie's performance and the cash prize that can save the pub.

Illustrative moment: Late in the film, the Mullenses celebrate Christmas together. At this point, they know that the pub is in serious financial trouble. But they celebrate nonetheless, vivaciously exchanging gifts, eating together, and opening Christmas crackers.

Little Women *Little Women* is THE story of nineteenth-century American family. The most prominent relation is sisterhood, which is presented as the closest of bonds, albeit sometimes a site of disagreement and difficulty. Meanwhile, Marmee and Mr. March try to be good parents to their daughters, even when that means deviating from conventional wisdom. They instill values including piety, generosity, freedom of thought, and self-respect. The girls try to be devoted children to their parents, rushing to tend to Marmee when she comes in from the cold and behaving the way they believe their absent father would want them to. At the beginning of the film, the family is the undisputed center of its own social life. Gradually the Marches let more people in, including the Laurences and John Brooke. But even though Jo is the one to advocate for welcoming Laurie, she is horribly upset at the prospect of any of the girls leaving home in order to marry; "Why must we marry at all?" she asks when Meg is considering John Brooke's proposal. Even late in the film, when all the girls have left home, fallen in love, and otherwise explored the wider world, family is still presented as the anchor of their lives.

Illustrative moment: Meg, Jo, and Beth tend to Amy after her fall through the ice and recovery from the freezing water. Jo is berating herself for not having forgiven Amy the night before after Amy burned her manuscripts. Amy asks Jo whether she loves Laurie more than she loves her; Jo replies that she could never love anyone as much as she loves her sisters.

Oscar and Lucinda Family is presented in the film as a source of love but also of loss, dispute, and difficulty. The film's first scene portrays Lucinda as a child, celebrating her birthday with two apparently happy and loving parents. In the next scene, child Oscar's father is weeping and mourning his wife's death; he almost drowns himself in the ocean but returns to shore when he sees his crying son. The next time we see Lucinda, her father is dead, and soon enough her mother is dead as well. Oscar's relationship with his one remaining parent soon becomes strained by his father's austere religious beliefs. They continue to love each other, but almost always from afar; the relationship never really normalizes. We see one other family: the married pair of Reverend Hugh and his wife. They, too, love each other but must suffer loss when Hugh kills himself in desperation about his finances. The film's final comment on family is perhaps its most interesting: after Oscar and the woman who forced him to have sex with her have both died, Lucinda adopts their child. This child has red hair like Oscar, and the film's penultimate scene suggests that he and Lucinda live happily together despite the lack of a biological relationship.

Illustrative moment: Oscar is on the boat that is about to leave England for Australia. His adoptive parents, Hugh and Betty, have come to see him off. Then his father, Reverend Hopkins, shows up too, even though he has not seen Oscar for a long time. Although father and son have never reconciled their doctrinal differences, Reverend Hopkins encourages his son to pray with him for a safe journey; he also gives Oscar the caul taken from his head when he was born, saying that cauls are believed to protect people from drowning. Father and son obviously still care about each other a great deal.

Friendship

Little Women For all the importance of family in the film, friendship is also crucial. Friendship can sometimes present a threat to family harmony: for example, the other girls are initially horrified when Jo proposes Laurie as a member of their theatrical society. But Jo is clearly someone who desperately needs a friend to join in her adventures, and Laurie's maleness particularly suits her tomboyish ways. The friendship between Jo and Laurie feels inevitable the moment they begin speaking to each other. Laurie (along with Mr. Laurence and John Brooke) becomes a friend to all the Marches, joining their celebrations and providing material assistance in times of crisis. Meg's female acquaintances never seem like real friends; they invite her to events but do not really seem to help or sympathize with her. Even a strong friendship like Jo and Laurie's, though, can become complicated, as when Laurie's feelings become romantic and Jo's do not. Still, their friendship weathers this crisis and seems likely to resume again after Laurie's return from Europe, albeit never in the same way as during their adolescence. Friendship enriches the Marches' lives.

Illustrative moment: At a ball early in the film, Jo darts into a side room to avoid a persistent young man and almost tumbles into Laurie, whom she has been wanting to meet since he moved in with his grandfather. Laurie is immediately sympathetic to her plight and reveals that he himself is hiding because he does not know anyone at the ball. He shares his dish of ice cream with her and they begin conversing quite naturally upon a wide range of subjects, including their lives, their families, and their hopes for the future.

Oscar and Lucinda Friendship is perhaps more prominent in the film than family. After their childhoods, Oscar and Lucinda both spend more time with friends than with relatives. At university, Oscar makes friends with a fellow student named Fish, who introduces him to betting on horse races. Oscar and Fish remain friends both during and after their time at Oxford; Fish gently criticizes Oscar's clothes, and Oscar seeks Fish's input when he is trying to decide whether to become a missionary. Lucinda also has friends before she meets Oscar: Reverend Dennis advises her on glass, and they spend several evenings each week in each other's company. Other evenings she spends with a different group of friends, often playing cards. Once Oscar and Lucinda meet, they develop a strong friendship. They initially bond over their shared love of gambling, knowing that society largely disapproves of this activity. But Lucinda becomes a true friend to Oscar when she invites him to stay at her house after he loses his ministerial position. At this point, they do all kinds of activities together and share confidences about their lives. For these two characters, friendship helps fill the void left by deceased and disputatious family members.

Illustrative moment: Soon after Oscar comes to stay at Lucinda's house, Lucinda's servant learns that he is a minister who has lost his position due to being caught gambling. The servant disapproves of this and quits her position in protest. Instead of being upset, Oscar and Lucinda take this as an opportunity to make a game out of the household chores. They start with scrubbing the floor together, starting on opposite ends and racing to meet each other in the middle. Both laugh, clearly enjoying the playful activity.

Love

High Tide As a story about parenthood, *High Tide* is also a story about love—both the want of it and the enjoyment of it. Quite early in the film, we see that Ally and her grandmother love each other: they speak to each other at home and playfully sing together, even though Bet has just refused permission for Ally to do something she wants to do. Bet expresses love in the form of protection and in the form of enjoyment of Ally's company. Ally's is not a loveless life. Still, she seems to need more people to love, given her eagerness to become close to Lilli. Lilli, meanwhile, is still reeling from the grief that comes from losing a loved one: her husband. Her love for John was so great that the pain of losing it ended up compromising her love for Ally. Love can make people do terrible things. Bet's love for Ally, similarly, drives her to behave very unkindly to Lilli. Yet love is also shown to have healing powers: we see love develop between Lilli and Ally, and it is strong enough to overcome Lilli's doubts about parenting. Ally and Bet's final interaction, too, is a loving one.

Illustrative moment: Despite Bet's efforts throughout the film to avoid losing Ally to Lilli, in the end she lets it happen out of unselfish love for Ally. In the second-to-last scene, Ally goes to Bet's work to tell her she is leaving with Lilli. Both cry, and Bet is obviously devastated, but she accepts that this is Ally's decision. Ally also reaffirms her love for Bet in this scene even though she is choosing to leave her.

The Last Days of Chez Nous Since *The Last Days of Chez Nous* is primarily a film about human relationships, an important theme is love. Ultimately, the events of the film matter because the characters love each other. The film portrays love between spouses, between siblings, between parents and children, between aunts and nieces, between lovers, and between friends. Love leads people to behave toward each other in a wide variety of ways. The major characters often relate to each other through playfulness and physical affection—sheer enjoyment of each other's company in shared activities. Love causes Beth to take Vicki in when she needs a place to stay. At the same time, love can make relationships difficult. The trust between Beth and Vicki makes it all the more painful when Vicki has an affair with JP. Similarly, Doug's verbal abuse of Beth is painful because she loves him and wants to have a good relationship with him. Because of her love, she makes the effort to repair the relationship, and the effort is partially successful. Love can promote both pain and healing. This is very true of the film's bittersweet ending: JP's shifting affections have caused a loss of love for several characters, but Annie finds a new relationship with Tim and Beth seems on the road to greater love for herself.

Illustrative moment: While Beth and Doug are driving, Doug criticizes Beth's driving and then begins to criticize other things about her as well, including her eating habits. Beth says she thinks they should talk about why they have these stupid fights; she says she doesn't want it to be this way. Doug says that it is her fault for doing idiotic things and insists that there is no point in talking things through. In response, Beth says that she loves him and that they are both too old to be fighting this way. Doug has no immediate reply, but when they then eat lunch at a restaurant, he appears to have softened: the waitress brings Beth two scoops of ice cream even though she only asked for one, and Doug offers to give her a hand. They both smile. The scene demonstrates the power of love to overcome differences, at least in a small way.

Little Women Love is present in *Little Women* in many forms. Love within the family unit is emphasized the most. It never truly falters, though Jo and Amy are sometimes temporarily at odds. The love among members of the March family is never in question. Romantic love, however, appears to Jo as a threat to the family bonds, and the film somewhat supports this view. Meg does move out of the house when she marries John Brooke, though she continues to live close by. As a teenager, Jo sees romantic love as not only threatening but silly and unnecessary. When Laurie proposes to her, she knows immediately that she has to refuse him because she does not love him romantically, but it obviously pains her to hurt him because she loves him very much as a friend. She tells Laurie she probably will never marry herself, but he retorts that she will fall in love herself one day. And he is right: Jo promptly falls in love with Friedrich Bhaer when she goes to New York City. Jo's marriage to Friedrich and Laurie's to Amy ostensibly resolve the problem of Laurie's romantic love for Jo, although the film ends before this can be substantially dramatized.

Illustrative moment: As Beth lies dying, she tells Jo that she does not mind death because she never had grand ambitions for her adulthood the way Jo did. But she says she does mind the grief it will cause the people who love her, especially Jo, and adds, "I know I shall be homesick for you, even in heaven." Beth's love for Jo is so great that all her piety is not enough to convince her she can be fully happy in heaven without her.

Oscar and Lucinda The film portrays various examples of love. Most prominently, the relationship between Oscar and Lucinda is a loving one. It takes a romantic turn when they kiss just before his journey with the glass church. But even before that moment, Lucinda shows love for Oscar by taking him in when he loses his position as a minister after being seen playing cards with her. Whenever they interact, Oscar and Lucinda clearly enjoy each other's company tremendously. In addition to playing cards together, they also have long conversations about their families, aspirations, and so on. Lucinda also expresses love for her mother and for Australia. Oscar, meanwhile, clearly loves his father despite their religious dispute, and he also comes to love his adoptive father, the Anglican minister Hugh. In the end, Oscar's death deprives Lucinda of him but not of his legacy: she adopts his child and is seen, in the final scene of the film,

happily playing with the child in the water. Oscar's death is tragic, but the compensation of his child ends the film on a positive note.

Illustrative moment: Love sometimes takes the form of jealousy. Although Lucinda's relationship with Reverend Dennis is not romantic, Oscar worries that it might be. One day after he has started staying at her house, Oscar spends a pleasant afternoon talking with Lucinda but then gets a worried look on his face when he sees a letter on the mantelpiece addressed to Reverend Dennis.

Charlotte Gray Romantic and familial love are major themes of *Charlotte Gray*. The former drives the plot. Charlotte meets Peter Gregory early in the film and is immediately wrapped up in her relationship with him, which is both sexual and confiding. After Peter disappears and she learns that his plane went down in France, she insists on being posted in France to do her secret agent work. She then proceeds to make repeated bad decisions in order to get more information about him; despite her speech to Robert Cannerly about the necessity of self-sacrifice during wartime, she frequently subordinates her professional duties to her inquiries about Peter. When her English contact tells her that Peter is dead, she is devastated. However, Charlotte's romantic allegiances shift over the course of her time in France; when the war is over, she rejects Peter and goes back to France to be with Julien. Meanwhile, familial love has been portrayed in the difficult relationship between Julien and his father. The two men struggle to connect, but ultimately, when Monsieur Levade is being interrogated by Vichy and German officials, Julien proudly calls himself his son and defends him. Charlotte, finally, develops a quasi-parental love for the Duguay boys, expressed in the form of everyday care for them.

Illustrative moment: After she learns that the Duguay boys are about to be sent away on a train by Nazi forces, she rushes to write them a letter in which she impersonates their mother. She lingers in Levade's house to write this letter even as German soldiers approach. She races to the train and manages to shove the letter into it just in time for them to receive it.

Death Defying Acts Love, more broadly, is another theme in the film. In addition to romantic love, there is a strong focus on parental and filial love. Harry Houdini expresses great love for his mother. It turns out that he feels guilty because he was absent from her deathbed—something he clearly sees as a failure of filial love. He reports feeling a great deal of parental love from her and now feels that he has repaid that love inadequately. Meanwhile, Mary and Benji have a somewhat odd relationship. They are not particularly affectionate with one another; Mary in particular is standoffish with her daughter and rarely initiates physical contact. Mary's love for Benji is shown primarily through her dedication to providing for them materially. After Houdini's departure and the news of his death, Mary and Benji finally seem to grow closer. The film clearly champions this development: the "brief encounter" between Mary and Harry facilitates the *rapprochement* between Mary and Benji.

Illustrative moment: In the film's final scene, Mary and Benji sit in a movie theater and watch a newsreel about Houdini's death and funeral. They both weep, and they embrace each other. This is more physical contact we have ever seen them express, and more emotional vulnerability. Their love for each other, though not new, is newly accessible now.

Desire/Affair/Sexuality

The Last Days of Chez Nous The film's climax is precipitated by an affair—though that is not the first affair to take place in the film. Quite early, JP admits to Beth that he is having an affair with a young woman. He then has an affair with Vicki that begins when Beth is out of town and quickly develops into a serious relationship. JP expresses to both Vicki and Beth that he feels very strongly about Vicki. Vicki does not articulate her feelings to the same extent, but she is willing to damage her relationship with her beloved sister in order to pursue the relationship, so clearly she feels strongly about it too. JP clearly expresses to Beth at various points in the film that he wishes society were set up differently, so that he could openly have two wives. He does not like having affairs, but he finds it difficult to be with only one woman. His affair with Vicki is catastrophic: it ends his marriage with Beth, destroys the relationship between the two sisters, separates a stepfather and stepdaughter, and forces two people to move. Nevertheless, the film does not particularly encourage moral condemnation of the affair; it feels regrettable but natural.

Illustrative moment: Vicki and Beth talk for the first time after JP reveals the affair. Vicki is surprised and devastated to realize that Beth never wants to see her again because of the affair. Tearfully, Vicki tells Beth that JP said Beth was worldly enough to be philosophical about the affair. But JP was wrong. Beth is horribly upset about the affair, and she can barely even stand to be in the same room with Vicki for a few minutes. Although the film does not morally condemn the affair, this scene emphasizes its devastating cost.

Starstruck Somewhat like family, sexuality is presented in the film as neither glorious nor disastrous. Instead, it is mostly either a complication or a diversion. Terry keeps his homosexuality a secret from the public, but he quickly comes to trust Jackie enough to reveal it to her, and it is presented to the film's audience in the form of an amusing musical number. Pearl's affair with Angus's father seems at first to be a simple source of fun, but Pearl is humiliated when he turns out to have been using her to get easy access to the pub's safe. Still, she is not crushed by this turnaround. Jackie has sex with Robbie early in the film and seems simply to enjoy herself, without experiencing a great deal of emotional investment (though she is happy to continue to spend time with him as the film goes on). It is notable that others in the family casually call her a "tart" for sleeping with Robbie, though she seems not to mind. Sexuality in the film is more a *potential* than an *actual* source of shame.

Illustrative moment: Angus is initiated into sexuality at the end of the film when he encounters a teenage girl in the foyer of the Sydney Opera House and experiences instant mutual attraction. Almost immediately, Angus and the girl begin kissing and rolling down the carpeted stairs. The scene evokes Jackie's remark to Angus earlier in the film that it is healthy for them both to develop relationships with other people.

Mrs. Soffel Kate's desire for Ed becomes evident during their first meeting in the prison through her close observation of him and appearance of embarrassment both during and after the meeting. During subsequent interactions, she does not protest when he touches her, and it is she who initiates a kiss through the bars of his cell. Ultimately, her desire is strong enough to prompt her to leave her family and go on the run with Ed. Kate's desire for Ed (and total lack of desire for her husband) makes her vulnerable. First, it makes her vulnerable to Ed's manipulations; as requested, she helps the Biddles escape. Second, it makes Kate a figure of sin and ridicule in the eyes of her family, the public, and the press. A newspaper carries the headline "Weak Woman's Insane Infatuation." Peter Soffel deems his wife so tainted that he will no longer permit their children to see her. Meanwhile, Ed seems to feel no desire for Kate at first, but by the time he and Jack escape, Ed is willing to endanger them by going to the Soffels' house to ask Kate to come with them. Ed embraces and kisses Kate fiercely during that scene, and in many other scenes in the second half of the film.

Illustrative moment: Ed and Kate have an opportunity to be alone together for the first time late in the film, when they and Jack have stopped at an old couple's home and been offered food and rest. Ed and Kate, who are posing as husband and wife, go up to a bedroom to rest, but they have sex instead.

Death Defying Acts The attraction between Harry Houdini and Mary McGarvie is a crucial element in the film. As soon as Mary first appears before him to audition for the psychic trial, Harry is obviously attracted to her. He picks her for the trial even though she has not really demonstrated anything in the way of psychic ability, and he soon invites her to a fancy lunch in his suite. At the lunch, he attempts to give her a pair of earrings. Mary rejects them and leaves; at this point, she is primarily driven by the pursuit of the \$10,000 prize and does not want to confuse the situation. Mary too, though, starts to feel attracted, and eventually she says to Benji that she's not sure she wants to fool Harry for the \$10,000 anymore. Another problem is Harry's marriage to another woman; Mary knows there is no future in her relationship with Harry, and she comes to resent him for toying with her. Still, ultimately Mary refuses to go through with the fake psychic performance because she cannot bear to trick Harry. And ultimately Harry comes to her house and they have a sexual encounter. Neither seems to regret this, though there are tears in the end. Ultimately, desire is not treated as a shameful or destructive force in the film.

Illustrative moment: When he comes to Mary's house near the end of the film, Harry confesses that he feels afraid and ashamed of his desire for her. Mary replies that there is no need to be ashamed of something so natural. Sometimes, she says, sex can even generate real love.

Grief/Loss

High Tide The root cause of the drama in *High Tide* is grief: Lilli's overwhelming grief at the death of her husband when both were very young. As Lilli tries to explain to Ally, she was simply unable to cope with this loss and felt that she had to shut off her love for baby Ally in order to give her up to be raised by Bet. Arguably, Lilli's explanation does not quite make sense (it clearly is not satisfying to Ally); the film may be suggesting that grief itself does not make sense. It shunts people into survival mode, prompting them to make decisions that seem necessary at the time but are difficult to justify later. Of course, the person who stepped in to raise Ally, Bet, was also grieving at the time, since Lilli's husband was also Bet's son. But Bet's grief was different, so she was able to take care of Ally. Ally, meanwhile, has spent her whole life quietly grieving both of her parents, since Bet told her that her father and her mother were dead. Ally is furious to learn that some of this grief was based on a false premise.

Illustrative moment: When Bet tells Ally that they are going to move in with Col, Ally protests on the grounds that they will be too far from a good beach for surfing. Bet gives her some guff for caring so much about surfing and about her precious surfboard. Ally retorts that the surfboard belonged to her father, Bet's son, and casts doubt on Bet's care for him. Bet is infuriated by this comment, and a shouting match ensues.

The Last Days of Chez Nous All of the characters deal with loss over the course of the film. Some losses have already occurred before the action begins: for example, JP misses some aspects of the France that he left years ago to live in Australia, and Vicki has just been through a breakup. Annie seems not to have any relationship with her biological father (about whom the film provides no details). Once the film begins, further losses occur. Vicki gets an abortion but regrets it immediately. The loss of her potential child clearly haunts her when she tearfully watches the documentary about childbirth on television. Above all, the affair between JP and Vicki and resulting breakup of JP and Beth's marriage occasions losses for all of the characters. JP and Beth lose each other as spouses. Beth and Vicki essentially lose each other as sisters. Annie loses her stepfather and aunt. JP loses his stepdaughter. Consistently, the type of loss that the film focuses on is the loss of human relationships. Still, the film ends on an optimistic note: Annie has forged a new relationship with Tim, and Beth seems content as she walks off alone to look for the church that belongs to the picturesque spire. Loss can be followed by new discoveries.

Illustrative moment: JP and Beth walk on a shoreline near the end of the film and discuss the end of their marriage. They seem sad but affectionate toward each other. Even though Beth says that their marriage was bad, they realize that neither of them really wants it to end. JP says, "It's not that I want to leave—" and she replies, "But you have to. Because now everything is smashed." The sense of loss is profound.

Little Women Beth's death in the novel *Little Women* is among the most notoriously sad events in literature, especially literature for young people. Armstrong's film presents it as a pivotal moment in the lives of all Beth's loved ones, especially Jo. Mr. and Mrs. March are grieved and rendered somewhat ineffectual by Beth's death. Amy is stuck in France with an ill Aunt March, but news of Beth's death causes Laurie to go to her side and eventually propose to her. Jo is overwhelmed with grief, going so far as to write Laurie a letter asking him to come to Concord, though they have not spoken since she refused his proposal. Then, Jo begins processing her grief by writing a novel about her and her sisters' adolescent lives. This novel then precipitates her reunion with Friedrich Bhaer and a huge step in her career as a published author. Rebirth comes out of her grief.

Illustrative moment: The morning after Beth's death, the Marches' servant, Hannah, scatters rose petals on Beth's closed piano and empty bed. She moves on to Beth's row of beloved dolls, scattering the last petals over them and then reaching out to briefly squeeze one of the dolls' hands.

Charlotte Gray In wartime, loss is the norm. During one of their conversations early in the film, Peter and Charlotte discuss bravery; Peter insists that he is not brave but instead simply keeps pushing on now that a huge number of his friends and comrades have been killed. Soon after this, Charlotte faces the "loss" of Peter in a couple of forms. First, he is sent away on a mission in France and goes missing. Some time later, her English contact tells her that Peter is dead, showing her an unclear photograph of an RAF pilot's body. Charlotte believes this news and is devastated; she goes to bed in her clothes and sleeps late the next morning, finally roused by the Duguay boys asking for their breakfast. She then snaps at

them. Clearly the loss is substantial for her. However, when she discovers months later that Peter is alive and wants to resume their relationship, she turns him down. The initial intensity of the loss does not necessarily mean that she later wishes to overturn it. Meanwhile, Julien suffers the loss of his comrades when German soldiers kill them, and the Duguay boys are dealing throughout the film with their parents' disappearance.

Illustrative moment: Julien responds to the killing of his comrades with sadness and anger. Thinking that Charlotte sold them out, he goes to Levade's house and accuses Charlotte, even pointing a gun at her. He is shouting and crying as he explains what happened.

Death Defying Acts Harry Houdini's actions throughout the film are driven by his grief—primarily grief for the death of his mother, but also grief for his own lost enthusiasm and idealism. Floored by his mother's death and overwhelmed by his guilt over missing it, Harry sets up the psychic trial and offers \$10,000—a huge amount of money in the 1920s—to any psychic who can tell him his mother's dying words. Although the public thinks that this is a mere act of telling him what he already knows himself, he actually wants to learn something he does not yet know. During the psychic trial, as Benji supposedly channels his mother's voice from the beyond, Harry expresses a great deal of emotion, visibly weeping and speaking effusively of his love for his mother. He begs her to forgive him. Meanwhile, he expresses nostalgia throughout the film for the way he used to feel about his life and his work as a magician. He has become jaded. His relationship with Mary and Benji helps him recover some of the joy he once had.

Illustrative moment: During the psychic trial, when Benji collapses to the floor and starts speaking in German and German-accented English, Harry's whole demeanor changes. He moves toward Benji, bends over her, and tries desperately to get his mother to forgive him. He speaks to her in German as well as English. He is crying the whole time.

Ambition/Ideals/Quest/Adventure

My Brilliant Career Sybylla is above all an idealist. At the beginning of the film, she is striving toward the ideal of an artist's life despite living in unfavorable circumstances. Sybylla speaks to her sister Gertie early in the film of her desire to leave Australia for a place in which she can be surrounded by other people who want to talk about books, music, and the visual arts. She has no sense of how she would get there or what it would really be like, but she aspires to this future. Nothing that happens to Sybylla in the film, though, gets her much closer to this ideal. She turns down the wealthy Londoner who proposes to her, even though presumably marrying him could very well grant access to the milieu she desires. This is because her other ideal is love; unlike many people around her, Sybylla will not consent to marriage without love. Ultimately, though, Sybylla's initial ideal of being an artist is the most important one: even marriage to a man she loves is unacceptable because she knows it would make her life as an artist impossible. The publication of Sybylla's manuscript, hinted at the end of the film, is the partial achievement of this ideal.

Illustrative moment: Sybylla's grandmother, Mrs. Bossier, is unhappy when she hears of Sybylla's decisive rejection of Frank Hawdon's proposal. She encourages Sybylla to think about Frank's wealth and her own limited prospects. Sybylla replies that she does not love Frank, so marrying him is out of the question. Mrs. Bossier scoffs at this response and tells her to be realistic. Sybylla insists again that she will not marry someone she dislikes.

Starstruck Ambition drives the plot of *Starstruck*. Almost everything is oriented around Jackie and Angus's shared ambition to make her a rock-and-roll singer. The film begins with Angus getting Jackie a gig at the Lizard Lounge and progresses through her tightrope stunt and appearance on Terry's show before culminating in her and The Wombats' prize-winning performance at the New Year's Eve competition at the Sydney Opera House. Jackie and Angus pursue their ambition despite unpromising odds and a lack of support from their family. Still, the positive reception of Jackie's first performance suggests to the film's audience that their ambition is not misplaced: she really could become a star. For Jackie, ambition drives her to do things she would rather not do, including the tightrope stunt and the performance on Terry's TV show that is not in her preferred style of music or dress. Both Jackie and Angus have their eyes on the future.

Illustrative moment: When Angus, Jackie, and The Wombats arrive at the TV studio where Terry's show is shot, they think that Jackie and The Wombats are supposed to perform together. They are told that Terry actually only wanted Jackie to perform. Angus and The Wombats want Jackie to refuse to perform alone and in a style that she dislikes, but she won't give up this big break. Although she is ultimately disappointed in her performance, she does not say that she regrets doing it.

Fires Within Nestor is fundamentally idealistic. He believes deeply in two ideals: one of a free Cuba, and another of himself as a person who always follows his conscience. Regarding the former, he frequently emphasizes the high numbers of political prisoners in Cuba and the gross injustice of such a repressive practice on the part of the Castro regime. In his speech near the end of the film, he states that he will not really be free until all Cuban political prisoners walk in freedom with him. Associated with this ideal of a free Cuba is his ideal of himself as an ethical political actor. Several times in the film, when Isabel emphasizes the risk his activities pose to himself and to his wife and daughter, Nestor responds not by denying those risks but by saying that he has to follow his conscience. These statements demonstrate that Nestor's conscience is not really focused on his family at all, but rather on himself as a certain kind of citizen. At the same time, Nestor's insistence to Sam that Isabel and Maribi are *his* wife and daughter reveal an ideal of family as enduring no matter what happens.

Illustrative moment: In one of the flashback scenes, Isabel discovers a pile of leaflets about political prisoners that Nestor has been hiding from her. She immediately understands what is going on and asks him how he could do something that will put himself and his family at such great risk. In response, he shows Isabel pictures of injured political prisoners and says that he cannot be silent on the subject any longer.

Little Women Even though they are girls in the nineteenth century, some of the March sisters harbor professional ambitions. Amy loves to paint and draw from a young age, and when she gets older, she increasingly desires to pursue art seriously. Aunt March supports Amy and takes her with her to Europe so that she can study painting while also continuing to work as a companion to Aunt March. Amy ends up taking painting classes in Vevey, France. Her professional ambitions are not mentioned again, however, after she marries Laurie—and it is also true that as a child, she expressed an aspiration to marry a rich man. Meanwhile, Jo aspires to be a professional writer. She works at writing on a regular basis even as an adolescent, often staying up late on her own to write by candlelight. From the beginning, Jo's ambitions are partly practical: she remarks early in the film that some magazines and newspapers pay quite well for the stories they print. Ultimately she gets in the habit of writing gruesome stories of crime and melodrama because publishers pay the most for them. Friedrich Bhaer is disappointed in these stories and tells her he wishes she would write from the heart; ironically, when she does, she produces a novel that is accepted by a publisher.

Illustrative moment: Speaking to Jo when she is very ill, Beth accounts for her acceptance of death by explaining that she did not have ambitions for adulthood like Jo and Amy did. This logic frames ambition as a kind of hope for the future—as a reason to live.

Death Defying Acts Harry Houdini is on a quest throughout the film—two quests, in fact. At first, only one is revealed: a quest to find out if any psychic is genuine. As far as the public knows, Houdini heard his mother's dying words for himself, so his call for a psychic to repeat them to him is about confirming knowledge he already has. Therefore, the purpose of the quest is to find out whether psychic powers can be scientifically verified. While he is indeed interested in the verifiability of psychic powers, we find out later in the film that Harry is also undertaking a second, secret quest: a quest to find out what his mother's dying words were, and to get her forgiveness for his absence from her death bed. While the public quest is important to him, the private one is far more powerful. At the psychic trial, Harry becomes very emotional as soon as Benji starts seemingly channeling his mother's spirit. He desperately apologizes for missing her death and begs for her forgiveness. Harry seems convinced that this really is his mother's spirit. Still, when he himself is dying and Mr. Sugarman confesses to having told the McGarvies that he missed his mother's death, he says "I know"; therefore, it is not entirely clear exactly what Harry believes he learned from the psychic trial.

Illustrative moment: Early in the film, having announced the psychic trial, Harry must contend with large numbers of people who want the chance to participate. He wades through many letters and eventually

auditions several people claiming to have psychic powers. This is the major logistical challenge of his quest, though certainly not the part that most challenges him emotionally.

Deception/Secrets/Appearance vs. Reality

High Tide Adults have been keeping secrets from Ally for most of her life and continue to do so throughout the period covered by the film. Bet keeps it a secret that Ally's mother is still alive, choosing instead to tell Ally the lie that her mother is dead. When Lilli happens to run into Bet and Ally, Bet vehemently orders Lilli to keep her true relationship to Ally a secret. Lilli reluctantly obeys, but she tells the secret to the local man she begins dating (Mick), and he takes it upon himself to tell Ally. Ally is briefly angry at Lilli for hiding her identity, but her anger soon gives way to curiosity and love. For Bet, though, Ally feels a deeper anger for the years of lying. This anger contributes to Ally's decision to leave with Lilli: she is ultimately angrier at Bet for keeping her mother's status a secret than at Lilli for abandoning her. It is not clear whether Bet hides the fact that Lilli is alive out of care for Ally's feelings or fear that she might lose her if Ally tried to find her mother—both seem to be contributing factors. Ultimately, the film suggests that secrets will be revealed, and that they can do great damage.

Illustrative moment: After Lilli tells Mick that she is Ally's mother, Mick tracks Ally down in a grocery store. He asks, "Has she told you yet?" Ally replies that she does not know what he is talking about. He tells her that Lilli is her mother. Ally appears shocked, puts down the object she was holding, and runs out of the store, in order to find Lilli. It is not clear whether Mick tells the secret out of care for Ally or a desire to get back at Lilli, who has recently left him.

Fires Within When Nestor comes to Miami, Isabel hides from him the fact that she has been romantically involved with Sam for years. She asks Sam to stay away so that she can wait for the right time to tell Nestor that she has found someone else. However, the ruse does not hold up very well. At Nestor's welcome party, Sam appears, and Nestor sees Isabel exchanging glances with him. The same thing happens at Estella's daughter's quinceañera. Nestor's resulting cold manner toward Isabel makes clear that he has some sense of the reality. Most unfortunately, Isabel implicitly forces Maribi to uphold the false appearance as well, and this is very difficult for her. When both Sam and Nestor come to pick her up from school one day and see each other, Maribi is ashamed and upset. She cries that night and tells Isabel she wants to go away. Isabel does not really fix the problem at that moment; it is some time before she picks one of the men. Ultimately, the appearance becomes the reality when Isabel decides to stay with Nestor and say good-bye to Sam.

Illustrative moment: Sam is at a bar with a couple of friends the night of Nestor's arrival in Miami. Another man taunts him about the arrival of Isabel's husband. Sam looks very sad and says that Isabel is going to wait for the right time to tell Nestor about Sam and ask him to leave. The man retorts, "What if he doesn't like what she says?" Sam has no answer, and the next time we see him, he is a little drunk and crashing Nestor's welcome party. The ruse is very painful for him.

The Last Days of Chez Nous *The Last Days of Chez Nous* is *not* filled with secrets in the way that some films about families are. For the most part, the members of the household are open and honest with each other. This makes the things that do remain secret all the more significant. For a little while, JP and Vicki's affair is secret. It begins while Beth is traveling with her father and they do not tell her, nor do they tell Annie and Tim. After Beth returns, there are a couple of clandestine kisses. Within what seems to be only a couple of days, though, JP says to Vicki that he is "ready for a scandal," and soon he tells Beth that there is something serious between him and Vicki. He does not like secrecy at all—and this is also apparent early in the film, when he admits to Beth that he is having an affair with a very young woman. The more painful secret in the film is the one that Vicki inadvertently reveals to Annie: the fact that Doug had refused to accept Beth's first husband, Annie's father, to the extent of boycotting the wedding, not visiting baby Annie, and not letting Vicki visit her either.

Illustrative moment: When Vicki tells Annie about her grandfather's rejection of her father, Annie is clearly distressed. She becomes very quiet and walks away from Vicki. Vicki expresses surprise that Beth has not told her these things. Annie never expresses her feelings in words, but it seems likely that she is upset about her mother's withholding of this information as well as about her grandfather's behavior.

Charlotte Gray Charlotte's work for the war effort takes the form not of battle but of intrigue. Her recruitment by Robert Cannerly happens almost before she is aware of it. During their first meeting, Cannerly learns two things about her that make him interested in her as a secret agent: she speaks French, and she expresses passionate feelings about patriotism and duty. He does not necessarily learn anything that makes her cut out for *intrigue* in particular, however, and Charlotte struggles with the work she is given. After she arrives in France, Charlotte attempts to carry out her tasks but frequently compromises her anonymity by asking for information about Peter Gregory. Her work is cloak-and-dagger, involving clandestine meetings with her English contact and the passing of information to Julien and other members of the French resistance. Charlotte keeps her promise not to reveal her real name to anyone during the war: it is only after the war ends that she returns to France and tells Julien her name. Ultimately, though, Charlotte is not particularly good at intrigue, and even her better efforts cannot forestall tragedies like the capture of Levade and the Duguay boys.

Illustrative moment: Charlotte enters a café, where she orders a coffee and sits down. A woman enters and sits by Charlotte. She asks whether Charlotte has "them" but says not to give them to her because she believes she was followed. The woman gets up, but Charlotte detains her to ask about Peter in Gillesse. Several gendarmes enter; the woman tells Charlotte to pass her the package. The gendarmes ask the woman for her papers, look at them, search her pockets, find the package, and then take her away. Charlotte is free but shaken.

Death Defying Acts Deception is a major theme in *Death Defying Acts*. Both Houdini and the McGarvies make their living through deceiving audiences. Show business in general is presented as a sort of benign deception. The McGarvies' psychic act at McTavish's palace does have a dark side, though: Mary and Benji commit acts of theft in order to secretly get information about their audience members ahead of time, and they sometimes fool grieving people into believing that they are actually communicating with their loved ones from beyond the grave. Meanwhile, Houdini and the McGarvies continually engage in other deceptions. Houdini is deceiving the entire world by claiming to have heard his mother's last words. The McGarvies deceive him by putting on an innocent front while repeatedly breaking into his rooms to get information about him. Ultimately even Mr. Sugarman engages in deception: he secretly gives information about Harry and his mother to the McGarvies. This is a film in which people deceive each other constantly. While show business is not overtly castigated, personal deception is presented as a problem to be overcome when Mary refuses to fake a psychic performance.

Illustrative moment: Near the end of the film, Mary and Benji look on as Harry drives away with Mr. Sugarman. Benji repeats some of the words she spoke at the psychic trial and says that she simply told Harry what he wanted to hear. "That's my girl," Mary replies, applauding Benji's hard-nosed attitude. But Benji tears up as Mary walks away, and Mary tears up even as she speaks. Each is claiming to be free of the emotion she is actually experiencing.

Conflict

High Tide Conflict underlies the major plot events of *High Tide*. Lilli becomes stuck in the town of Eden in the first place because her history of conflict with her boss finally leads him to fire her. Then, as soon as Lilli and Bet lay eyes on each other, a new conflict immediately arises: Bet is terrified that Lilli has come on purpose to reclaim Ally, and she shouts at Lilli that she will kill her if she tries to do so. Interestingly, there was not really a conflict between Bet and Lilli prior to this moment: Bet apparently took over the care of Ally uncomplainingly, and as long as Lilli remained away, there was no quarrel between them. The other conflict that follows Lilli's arrival in Eden is between Bet and Ally: when Ally finally learns that Lilli is her mother and has been alive all this time, she yells at Bet. This conflict is much deeper than others that have arisen between Bet and Ally earlier in the film, such as disagreement over whether Ally should be allowed to go to the disco with her friends. Day-to-day conflicts like those seem not to affect the relationship, but Ally's anger over Bet's lie causes her to leave Bet altogether.

Illustrative moment: One day, Ally is engaged in polishing her surfboard by herself. Lilli watches her in secret. But then Bet appears and sees Lilli. Lilli tries to slip away, but Bet literally runs after her and repeats that she wants her to stay away from Ally. Lilli, now angry herself, asks Bet what Ally knows about her, and Bet reveals that she has told Ally her mother is dead. They then discuss the death of John (Bet's

son and Lilli's husband), and Lilli accuses Bet of not having been very helpful to her then. The conversation ends with no resolution.

Fires Within *Fires Within* stages an interpersonal conflict within the context of a national one. Cuba, first of all, is suffering at the time of the film's setting from the oppressive policies of Fidel Castro's regime. The slightest criticism of the government can easily land an ordinary Cuban citizen in prison. Numerous Cuban and Cuban-American characters have loved ones in prison for political reasons. In turn, the political conflict causes personal conflicts. In flashbacks, we see Isabel and Nestor fighting over whether he should continue his political activities despite the risk that he will be imprisoned and that Isabel and Maribi will be subjected to other punishments from the government. Later, Isabel, Sam, and Nestor become locked in a conflict over how to resolve their complicated situation. Isabel clashes with Sam over his inability to stay away, Isabel clashes with Nestor again over his political activities, and Sam and Nestor clash with each other over who has the stronger claim to Isabel's and Maribi's affections. The film makes clear that national conflict generates interpersonal conflicts that are ultimately not really the fault of any of the individuals involved. The political conflict endures beyond the end of the film, but the interpersonal conflict is resolved when Isabel recommits to her family with Nestor.

Illustrative moment: In a flashback, we see a visit between Isabel and Nestor in prison that dramatizes the intersection of political and personal conflicts. Overseen by guards, they converse at a rudimentary table in close proximity to other prisoners and visitors. Isabel begs Nestor to go through the motions of the rehabilitation program because it will enable him to be released and keep the government from cutting off her and Maribi's food, medicine, and access to school. Nestor refuses, and the conversation becomes heated. This prompts a couple of guards to violently intervene between Isabel and Nestor, ultimately dragging them both away yelling.

The Last Days of Chez Nous Most of the characters deal with both internal and external conflicts. Beth and JP sometimes have conflicts, and after the affair is revealed, Beth and Vicki do as well. The interpersonal conflict that seems to bother Beth most, though, is the one with her father. She goes so far as to organize a three-week trip with him in hopes of repairing the relationship. The film dramatizes the petty insults and fights between them; however, it also shows the eventual improvement in the relationship. Meanwhile, characters face internal conflicts. Vicki struggles to decide whether or not to get an abortion; even after she gets one, she continues to reflect on whether that was the right decision. Later in the film, Vicki is torn between her love for her sister and her growing love for JP. She does not look particularly happy in the film's final shot of her in the new house with JP, which suggests that this internal conflict remains unresolved. JP himself is torn between his love for Beth and his love for Vicki. He is also torn between love for his home country and desire to remain in Australia.

Illustrative moment: Vicki and Beth meet in a diner after JP has told Beth that he and Vicki are having a serious affair. Beth expresses her hurt. Vicki says she feels she has to stop holding back from taking the things she wants just because they already belong to Beth. But she also embraces her fiercely. Vicki is horribly torn and does not know what to do.

Identity/Coming of Age

My Brilliant Career Sybylla is a teenager throughout the several years spanned by the film. In an early scene, while Sybylla is playing the piano, her mother interrupts her to say that because she is "a young woman now," Sybylla must provide for herself. Her mother's plan is for her to go out to work as a general servant. Sybylla is horrified by this idea but is only saved by her grandmother's invitation to state at Caddagat—Sybylla herself does not have a say in the matter. At Caddagat, she begins to wear clothes and hairstyles more fit for a young woman than a young girl, and she has her first two romantic experiences. Later Sybylla does go out to work as a governess for a large bush family; although she hates it at first, she learns how to cope and ends up winning the affection of her employers. By the end of the film, Sybylla is making her own decisions—staying at her parents' home and working there, writing her book, and turning down Harry's renewed marriage proposal. Unlike a conventional Victorian or Hollywood heroine, Sybylla comes of age through independence rather than marriage.

Illustrative moment: Mirroring Sybylla's defiant act of writing at the beginning of the film, the very last scene of the film depicts the completion of her manuscript and a peaceful walk to the post box to mail it

off to Blackwood's Publishers in Edinburgh. Writing on the screen tells us that Blackwood's went on to publish Sybylla's book. Coming of age as a writer is the happy ending of the film.

Starstruck *Starstruck* dramatizes coming-of-age processes for both Jackie and Angus. About halfway through the film, Jackie remarks that the two of them rely too heavily on each other and need to learn to make independent decisions and form relationships with other people. For Jackie, agreeing to perform on Terry's show despite Angus's protests is the first such decision she has made in a long time. Angus, for his part, is only too happy to embark on some sort of relationship with the girl he meets in the foyer of the Sydney Opera House. Still, Jackie and Angus are by no means at odds at the end of the film; they achieve what they do because of their shared ambition and dedication. When Angus overhears the man in the suit telling Pearl that they may lose the pub, he soon tells Jackie, and it is the two of them—not the adults—who come up with a successful plan to save the pub. In a way, they are doing what Pearl always wanted: developing an investment in the family business. But they do so on their own terms.

Illustrative moment: At Christmas, Pearl gives Jackie a fancy dress that used to be hers. Pearl says that she had been saving the dress but now realizes she has nothing to save it for. Instead, it is Jackie's turn to have it. Pearl playfully nudges Jackie in the arm and tells her not to do anything in the dress that Pearl would not have done herself.

Little Women *Little Women* covers quite a bit of time in the Marches' lives—at least six or seven years. The girls range from twelve to sixteen years of age at the beginning of the film. Adolescence is for them, as for many people, a time of contradictory impulses and desires. Sometimes they dress up in costume or play in the snow like children, while other times they attend formal events like balls and the theater. Amy contends with popularity contests and fads at her school. Jo tries to curl Meg's hair in preparation for a ball, but in her inexperience she accidentally burns a whole strand of hair right off Meg's head. As the girls get older, they must come of age whether they wish to or not. Meg seems eager for adulthood and happily accepts John Brooke's marriage proposal. Jo is very resistant to the idea of their growing up and leaving home, but after she gets an unwelcome marriage proposal from Laurie and learns that not she but Amy will be going to Europe with Aunt March, even Jo can no longer stand to remain at home as though nothing has changed. Ultimately, Meg, Jo, and Amy all succeed when they leave home, one way or another.

Illustrative moment: Laurie proposes marriage to Jo. He tells her he has always loved her. She is horrified, insisting that they would be completely unsuited to each other because they both have terrible tempers and because she is too unfashionable to be the wife of someone as wealthy as he is. Jo also suggests that she is unlikely ever to marry. But Laurie, crushed, angrily tells her that he's sure that before long, she will fall in love with someone else and love him desperately. Laurie envisions Jo as an adult before she does so herself.

Charlotte Gray Charlotte matures a great deal over the course of the film, even though she is too old for it to be a "coming of age" story *per se*. She starts out as a somewhat naïve idealist, chiding Robert Cannerly for making light of wartime duty and delivering a speech about the importance of patriotic self-sacrifice. In her conversations with Peter Gregory, too, she reveals some naïveté in interpreting his wartime service as clear evidence of extraordinary bravery. Peter insists that he is no braver than anyone else and simply doing what circumstances have forced him to do. When she gets to France herself, Charlotte is much less self-sacrificing than her initial speech would lead the viewer to expect, given that she frequently endangers her colleagues and the resistance mission by interrupting to ask for information about Peter. After she is told of Peter's death and spends time working in France with Julien and others, however, Charlotte's understanding deepens. She shifts her focus to smaller goals close at hand like writing the letter to the Duguay boys in the person of their mother. By the time the war is over, she is doing unglamorous relief work in London and rejects the opportunity to resume her relationship with Peter.

Illustrative moment: A particularly unpleasant episode in Charlotte's loss of idealism is her interaction with the Lezignac schoolteacher. At one point, he follows Charlotte as she walks. He tells her he knows that Levade is hiding the Jewish Duguay boys and will not expose them to the Germans if she will sleep with him. He points a gun at her. She looks shocked but eventually nods. The situation does not end up playing out as planned, but emotional damage has been done already.

Religion/Faith

Mrs. Soffel Religion is a prominent theme in *Mrs. Soffel*, largely because of the devout Christianity of the title character. Christianity is associated in the film with compassion for prisoners and opposition to the death penalty. Kate distributes bibles to the prisoners and reads from the bibles with them. Specifically, it is passages from the compassionate New Testament that she chooses—passages that offer consolation and a promise of eternal life. No characters in the film associate religion with sin or punishment. In addition to offering comfort to the prisoners, Kate also uses the idea of God to comfort her children. She encourages them to say their prayers and to believe that God is always watching them compassionately. When she suggests the same ideas to Ed Biddle, he at first resists, demonstrating his knowledge of religion by reciting from Revelation but insisting that Christianity's promises are hollow. Kate and Ed's relationship begins with fierce debates about the nature of God and the existence of heaven. Ed uses Kate's religiosity to manipulate her: the letter in which he asks her for a saw is delivered in a bible and uses religious language. Although this is insincere, Ed stops disputing Kate's religious comments after they run away.

Illustrative moment: The film opens with a scene of prayer. A woman and three children walk to the prison and stand outside the main entrance. As the children close their eyes and adopt an attitude of prayer, the woman prays aloud that God will strengthen and save Ed and Jack Biddles.

Oscar and Lucinda Like gambling, faith is both a literal and a more abstract theme in *Oscar and Lucinda*. Literally, much of the early part of the film is about Oscar's search for a religious home for himself. He believes his dissenting minister father to be in error but is unsure what Christian denomination is the right one; he ends up praying for a sign from God and then believing he has gotten a sign that the right church is the Anglican Church. He then joins the fold of the local Anglican minister, Hugh, and eventually goes to Oxford to become a minister. He duly becomes ordained, first working as a teacher in a religious school and then taking up missionary work in Australia. He believes that the glass church will glorify God with its striking appearance. Another character, Lucinda's friend Reverend Dennis, is also a minister. But the film is also interested in "faith" beyond literal religion. To gamble is to have faith that you will win a game you have no direct control over. As discussed above, Oscar explicitly casts faith in God as a sort of gambling. Oscar and Lucinda also both make leaps of faith in their lives, such as her purchase of the glassworks and his career decisions.

Illustrative moment: As a boy concerned that his father is in doctrinal error, Oscar asks for a sign from God telling him which Christian denomination he should follow and, eventually, preach. He uses chalk to draw a grid on a rock in which different squares represent different denominations. He then turns around and tosses a pebble behind him several times. Each time, it lands on "Anglican." Oscar is displeased but takes the sign as definitive. Placing his faith in God, he walks to the nearest Anglican church.

Duty / Ethics

Mrs. Soffel Characters are driven by strong (and, at times, conflicting) senses of duty. Peter Soffel takes very seriously his professional duty to keep his prisoners safe and to carry out the sentences determined by judges and juries. Peter's professional duty conflicts with what Kate comes to see as her Christian duty to speak out against any form of killing, even state-sanctioned killing. Kate's Christian duty also motivates her habitual charitable activities at the prison, including providing bibles, reading the Bible, providing extra blankets in winter, and spending time with the prisoners. In private life, Peter clearly feels a strong sense of duty toward his children, which prompts him to correct inappropriate behavior and to deprive them of things they want (including seeing their own mother) if he believes that those things might endanger them. Peter never speaks unkindly to his children or treats them cruelly; he is obviously motivated by duty rather than maliciousness. He also clearly does not relish his rejection of his wife; in a late scene, he cries while going through her belongings. Kate, meanwhile, never articulates any feelings of duty as a wife and mother, but her departure suggests either that the burden of this duty is too much or that she actually does not see it as a duty at all.

Illustrative moment: At dinner, Peter tells Kate that a woman stopped him in the street that day and called him a murderer for keeping the Biddles in prison and planning their execution. He insists that he is neither

judge, nor jury, nor executioner: he is only doing his duty of carrying out a sentence determined by others. He is upset at being blamed for something that he believes he has no choice but to do.

Fires Within Conflicting ideas about duty drive some of the interpersonal strife in this film. Nestor sees his patriotic duty as primary, whereas Isabel believes that his duty to avoid harming his family is more important. The two of them struggle to communicate because of this fundamental disagreement. For Nestor, both before and after his own imprisonment, nothing is more important than his use of his writerly talents to speak out against the regime's unlawful imprisonments of any and all critics. For most of the film, he will sacrifice anything to carry out this duty. For Isabel, this attitude is simply mistaken, and she is sad and angry that he sees her and Maribi as less important than his political ideals. Nestor finally changes his mind, though, after Sam criticizes him for being willfully ignorant of his family's suffering and gives him a detailed accounting of what Isabel went through while Nestor was in prison. Even though Nestor repudiates Sam, it is clear that Sam's words affected him and influenced his final decision to set aside politics and focus on his duty to his family. The film presents this as a positive development.

Illustrative moment: In a flashback, Nestor gets up in the middle of the night and prepares to distribute political leaflets. Isabel begs him not to, saying that the police must already suspect him and will surely arrest him this time. She implies that he may never get to see her or Maribi again. Nestor counters that this is his duty, and that he must not silence his conscience. They shout at each other but do not reach any understanding.

War/National Events

My Brilliant Career Sybylla seems somewhat anti-Australia in the early part of the film, expressing a desire to travel and talk to people in other countries. She loves Caddagat partly because it is like an English estate. Moreover, she tells Harry she could not stand to be a wife and mother in the bush. However, in the end, she does choose to live with her parents in bush and seems tolerably content to do so. After she puts her packaged manuscript in the post box at the end of the film, she stops to lean on a gate and watch the sun rise over the arid landscape. She smiles while doing so. Sybylla has, it seems, become reconciled to her country. Throughout the film, comments are made about the country's economic state. Several times, tramps come by asking for provisions. Mrs. Bossier and Helen are somewhat conservative in their handouts, saying that Sybylla would give away half the estate if she could. At a couple of the dinners at Caddagat, the diners discuss Australia's economy. The film takes place right at the beginning of Australia's new status as a commonwealth largely separate from Britain. Like her country, Sybylla seeks a measure of independence.

Illustrative moment: The first words of the film are "Dear fellow countryman"—the opening of Sybylla's manuscript, read aloud by Sybylla herself. She chooses to address her autobiography to other citizens of Australia. She thus sees herself as engaged in something of a nationalist project even from the beginning, despite her desire to explore other lands.

Charlotte Gray Perhaps the most prominent theme in *Charlotte Gray* is war—not *battle*, but the infusion of war into the lives of all people in the countries involved. The film's very first scene features a discussion between Charlotte and Robert Cannerly about what citizens owe their countries in wartime. Charlotte insists that it is every citizen's duty to work and make sacrifices for their country. However, Charlotte's idea of wartime duty is fairly simplistic; as soon as she actually goes to France to work as a secret agent, she discovers that the reality is more complicated. For all her high-flown language about selflessness, Charlotte is preoccupied with her worries about Peter Gregory and repeatedly compromises her missions by stopping to ask people questions about him. Meanwhile, she engages in violent acts of sabotage against German soldiers, which she finds distressing even though she does not regret what she has done. War is portrayed in the film as involving violence, death, and poverty (near the end of the film we briefly see Charlotte working for a relief organization in London).

Illustrative moment: After her first sabotage mission against German soldiers in Lezignac, Charlotte returns to Levade's house visibly shaken. Levade immediately understands that she is reeling from being involved in causing destruction and death to other people, albeit people working for the enemy. He tells her that it is always difficult at first, and he explains that he served in World War I as an engineer. Charlotte is clearly comforted to learn that Levade has firsthand understanding of her distress.

Imprisonment/Freedom

Mrs. Soffel Many of the film's scenes take place in the Allegheny County Prison, of which Peter Soffel is the warden. In fact, almost the entire first half of the film takes place either in the prison or just outside it (in the Soffels' adjacent residence or in the street just outside the main entrance). The film's presentation of prison is not sensationalist or sordid, but neither is it in any way glorified. Rather, prison in *Mrs. Soffel* is simply bleak, colorless, cold, and dull. Guards do not abuse prisoners but are sometimes unkind to them. Warden Peter Soffel does not go out of his way to be cruel or kind; he carries out his official duties exactly. He rarely sets foot in the prison wards themselves, managing them instead from his office in the same building. Prison is something of a leveler, a place where men and women, black and white are confined alike. Kate's charitable activities in the prison are treated as a matter of course. The film also shows prison's lasting consequences: when Ed has an angry outburst soon after their escape, he apologizes to Kate by saying that he has been in prison for much of his life and has therefore never really learned how to act with people.

Illustrative moment: Ed and Jack discuss the possibility of trying to escape the prison by starting a fire and then seizing a guard's keys when the guards come to put it out. Jack observes, though, that this plan is risky because there is always the chance that the guards will not come—that they will let the Biddles burn instead. Both men are silent after this observation, realizing that Jack may well be right, and that the prison guards would indeed have the power to let them die in that situation.

Fires Within Apart from the romantic drama, Nestor is a man who has spent eight years in prison (expecting a twenty-year sentence or more) and has suddenly been released. Nestor looks around wide-eyed as Isabel drives him into Little Havana and takes him into her/their apartment. He smiles as Maribi shows him her room and as he flops on his new bed. On his first full day in Miami, he is instructed in the varieties of breakfast cereal by Maribi, and he explores the streets of Little Havana alone on foot. He eats a good Cuban sandwich, tries frozen yogurt for the first time, and comes out of a bookstore with two armfuls of books and newspapers. Nestor clearly enjoys his freedom. He is not unscarred, however, either physically or emotionally. Physical scars are visible on his back, though they do not seem to pain him. Whenever he speaks about those remaining in political prison or sees photographs of them, he quickly becomes emotional and determined to work on their behalf. Nestor is keenly aware that many others are not sharing this freedom with him.

Illustrative moment: In his speech to the Cuban-American community of Miami toward the end of the film, Nestor declares that they must all use their freedom of movement and speech to argue on behalf of Cuban political prisoners in the international press and for the international human rights community. He also declares his intention to devote his freedom to his family. Nestor here turns his back on the choice to use his freedom to engage in further criminal activities against the Castro regime.

CHARACTERS

Contents

Open vs Closed

Agreeable vs Disagreeable

Conscientious vs Unconscientious

Rational vs Emotional

1. Open

- a. **Sybylla Melvyn** (*My Brilliant Career*) Sybylla, unsurprisingly for the heroine of a coming-of-age story, is eager for new experiences and new ideas—ranging from exploring musical and literary art forms to falling in love.
- b. **Ed Biddle** (*Mrs. Soffel*) Ed is open to whatever experiences and help he can find. He is open to Mrs. Soffel's help even though he does not really care about her; later, even though he did not expect this, he is open to falling in love with her.

- c. **Ally** (*High Tide*) Like Sybylla in *My Brilliant Career*, Ally is a young person open to the new. This includes being open to her long-lost mother, despite her hurt and anger at this person for having abandoned her as a baby.
 - d. **Sam** (*Fires Within*) Sam loves Isabel and is open to whatever she needs from him. He has lovingly accepted her daughter as essentially his own. When Isabel decides to return to her long-lost husband, Sam is very sad but does not blame her or express anger.
 - e. **Jo March** (*Little Women*) Another young heroine, Jo is growing up and eagerly soaking in whatever new experiences she can get. She does bold things like making friends with a boy and going to New York City to work and write.
2. Closed
- a. **Peter Soffel** (*Mrs. Soffel*) Mr. Soffel is a rigid man; he is the warden of a prison and sticks to the letter of the law. After his wife runs away with Ed Biddle, his daughter suspects that he would not take her back even if she asked, such is his adherence to strict Victorian morality.
 - b. **Nestor** (*Fires Within*) Nestor is a man unwilling to compromise. Even after having a baby daughter, he insisted on continuing his political rebellion as though nothing had changed, knowing this put him at risk of imprisonment. He later assumes Isabel will return to him simply because she is his wife.
 - c. **Oscar Hopkins** (*Oscar and Lucinda*) Oscar is extremely superstitious and afraid to go outside his very proscribed form of risk-taking. His timidity ultimately costs him his life.
 - d. **Harry Houdini** (*Death Defying Acts*) At this late stage of his life, Houdini has become jaded and tired. He is going through the motions of his career but no longer takes joy in it.
3. Agreeable
- a. **Terry Lambert** (*Starstruck*) Although he works in the often-cutthroat entertainment industry, Terry turns out to be a nice, caring person, particularly toward Jackie Mullens.
4. Disagreeable
- a. **Amy March** (*Little Women*) Although she loves her sisters, Amy ultimately takes care of herself alone. She is willing to take what others want and prioritize her own self-actualization over the needs of her family.
5. Conscientious
- a. **Aunt Helen** (*My Brilliant Career*) Despite—or perhaps because of—her love for Sybylla, Helen tends to encourage Sybylla to be careful and not flout social conventions. Helen has experienced social precarity herself and knows that respectability is not something to throw away lightly.
 - b. **Pearl Mullens** (*Starstruck*) Pearl is the person who keeps the household and the family business going—even in the face of struggle, worry, and disappointment.
 - c. **Bet/Nan** (*High Tide*) Bet adopted her granddaughter, Ally, when Ally was a baby abandoned by her own mother. She has cared for Ally ever since, working two jobs in order to do it.
 - d. **Meg March** (*Little Women*) Meg is forever aware of Victorian conventions and the family's financial situation. Like Helen in *My Brilliant Career*, she understands that respectability is valuable. She is often the one encouraging her sisters to be more conscientious.
 - e. **Beth March** (*Little Women*) Beth, too, tends to be conscientious, particularly when it comes to unselfishly caring for the poor. She also strives to be a peacemaker between her sisters.

- f. **Julien Levade** (*Charlotte Gray*) Julien works tirelessly to support the communist cause and the French resistance.
6. Unconscientious
 - a. **Kate Soffel** (*Mrs. Soffel*) Kate falls in love with Ed Biddle and then throws away everything else in her life. This includes her marriage, her place in society, and even her children.
 - b. **Lilli** (*High Tide*) Lilli abandoned her child as a baby, unable to cope with the death of her husband. She loses a job at the start of the film because she is unwilling to make peace with her boss.
 - c. **Vicki** (*The Last Days of Chez Nous*) Vicki is a free spirit. She is accidentally pregnant at the beginning of the film, and she ends up having an affair with her sister's husband.
 - d. **Lucinda Leplastrier** (*Oscar and Lucinda*) Lucinda is unconscientious specifically in social matters; she gambles and interacts with disreputable people. This does not bother her, and she is wealthy enough not to worry about society's opinion.
 7. Rational
 - a. **Isabel** (*Fires Within*) After Nestor returns from prison, Isabel is torn between him and Sam. When she chooses Nestor, it seems that she does so from a rational perspective—he is her husband and the father of her child—rather than an emotional one (i.e. simply preferring him).
 - b. **Beth** (*The Last Days of Chez Nous*) Beth is the person who keeps “chez nous” together across generations, nationalities, and personalities. She is much more practical and rational than her sister, Vicki, in all of her decision-making.
 - c. **Mary McGarvie** (*Death Defying Acts*) As a single working mother without much financial stability, Mary clearly feels that she has no choice but to be rational. She prioritizes practical considerations over emotional ones (until the end of the film, at least).
 - d. **Benji McGarvie** (*Death Defying Acts*) Benji has been trained by her mother and follows in her footsteps when it comes to taking a rational attitude toward the world. She always keeps her eye on the financial prize.
 8. Emotional
 - a. **Harry Beecham** (*My Brilliant Career*) Despite his rigid upper class social position, Harry is ready to marry the penniless, wild Sybylla. She is the one who ultimately refuses him.
 - b. **Jackie Mullens** (*Starstruck*) Jackie wants to be a rock-and-roll star and will do anything to fulfill this desire. She also follows her heart when it comes to her personal relationships.
 - c. **Angus Mullens** (*Starstruck*) Like his cousin Jackie, Angus is largely driven by emotions. This is unsurprising given that they are both teenagers. Angus often skips school in order to hang around with the slightly older Jackie and pursue his current scheme.
 - d. **JP** (*The Last Days of Chez Nous*) JP is perhaps the most emotional character in Armstrong's oeuvre. He explains to Beth, his wife, that he simply cannot remain with only one woman, and he enacts this feeling by starting an affair with Vicki even though it destroys the household and the relationship between the sisters.
 - e. **Charlotte Gray** (*Charlotte Gray*) Although she is on an extremely important war mission throughout most of the film, Charlotte's decisions tend to be driven by her love for her lost pilot lover, Peter.