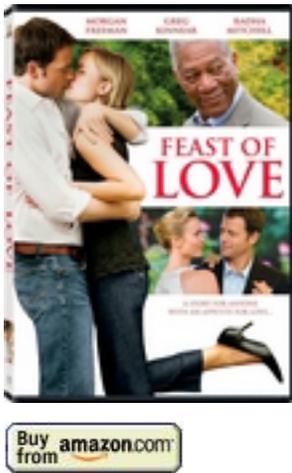


## Fast-Food Love Feast

A review of the film



### Feast of Love

(2007)

Robert Benton (Director)

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Reviewed by

[Linda R. Young](#)

*Feast of Love* (2007) is the latest examination of love, loss, and the healing through relationships from director Robert Benton, of *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) fame. The film follows the intersecting lives and couplings of a host of characters hoping to fill the lacunae in their lives with love.

Harry (Morgan Freeman) is the community elder and the film's narrator who observes the plights of the other characters from his Portland coffeehouse perch, offering solicited and unsolicited pearls of wisdom. On the surface he is a storybook example of lasting love—happily married for many years to Esther (Jane Alexander), who is unstintingly supportive, understanding, and his equal partner. Yet Harry cannot live or love fully because he carries a deep scar from the loss of his son to a heroin overdose, which completely

blindsided him. He blames himself for not having seen the flags and for not having been a firmer guide in his son's life. His guilt consumes him to the point that he is unable to work. This depiction of Harry as someone whose relational wounds contribute to his being an astute analyzer of others' wounds while unable to move beyond his own is psychologically accurate.

The theme of not seeing loved ones as they really are recurs throughout the film. Bradley (Greg Kinnear) loses his wife to a lesbian who woos her right in front of his eyes without his noticing. His wife's chief complaint on leaving is that Bradley never really knew her, instead projecting his own ideas about who she is and what would make her happy onto her. Bradley is not prone to productive self-reflection and shrugs off Harry's insights about his relationships. He repeats his pattern of romantic illusions and idealization almost immediately after his wife walks out, becoming captivated by the cool, distant, gorgeous Diana (Radha Mitchell). But Diana is in love with a married man who treats her as a sex object and degrades her. She hopes to use the relationship with Bradley to make her married lover jealous enough to leave his wife, but her tryst partner calls her bluff and leaves Diana instead. Diana marries Bradley to lick her wounds.

## **Love Wounds**

Psychologists from Freud to the present day have discussed how childhood wounds manifest themselves in adult love relationships and how an individual's reactivity to abandonment, abuse, rejection, and other early injuries is likely to be transferred onto love objects and recapitulated.

Imago relationship theory (Hendrix, 1988, 1992, 1996) is a good eclectic conceptual model for understanding how and why the characters in this film are attracted to others with whom they are most likely to repeat negative patterns. A fundamental premise is that our childhood wounds from dysfunctional family dynamics drive us to seek corrective experiences in our adult love relationships with people who are at the same developmental stage of relational growth. We respond most strongly to people who contain both the positive and negative traits of our primary caregivers, but initially we are only able to see the positive features. When the glow of infatuation wears off, the unconscious negative attractors become visible and power struggles typically begin, which are characterized by blame, projections, withdrawal, and other psychological defenses.

These power struggles present golden opportunities for growth in love relationships or lead to breakups and repetition of the same pattern with new partners if no lessons have been learned. The growth process requires conscious sustained effort; willingness to be emotionally vulnerable; the ability to empathize; and readiness for insight through self-help, good role models, and/or therapy. In this film the messy work of healing is entirely left out.

Consciously, Bradley's unmet needs (and physical attraction to Diana) blind him to the reality that she is unable to be intimate with anyone who treats her well. According to Imago theory, this is exactly why he has unconsciously chosen her. Bradley and Diana are both longing for love yet unable to receive it fully. Bradley manifests this by choosing unavailable women, onto whom he projects his unrealized fantasies and is bound to be rejected. Diana defends herself from the pain of her longing by being selfish and transactional. The following exchange on their wedding night highlights their positions:

Diana: You know, sometimes I think love is just a trick nature plays on us. Just a way of bringing more screaming babies into the world.

Bradley: You actually believe that?

Diana: Sometimes.

Bradley: God, I think it's everything. The only meaning there is to this crazy dream world we're trapped in.

Diana: I hope not. (She walks away from him, leaving him outside alone.)

The film does attempt to show us how healing can occur through relationship, as Imago theory suggests, by introducing a young free spirit named Chloe (Alexa Davalos). Although her parents are both dead, she moves through life with shining optimism, openness, empathy, and faith in love's life-affirming powers. She appears whole and full rather than hungry like Bradley and Diana.

Chloe meets a seven-months-clean heroin addict named Oscar (Toby Hemingway) and warns him that she thinks she scares guys away because she is "intense." Oscar has an abusive alcoholic father who drove his mother away in Oscar's early teens and is no stranger to intensity. He is a moth to her flame, and they bond deeply, quickly, sexually, and spiritually, imagining a future together after their first night of sex. When Oscar's father threatens Chloe in a drunken rage, Oscar says, "Don't be scared. He's a mean son of a bitch, but I can be, too. I'll protect you from anything."

In the real world, relationships that start with such high mutual infatuation, immediate sex, family histories of abuse, death and abandonment, and a line of dialogue like that are usually doomed to failure. But in *Feast of Love* they achieve the American romantic love ideal of mutual passion, intimacy, and commitment. Chloe heals Oscar's wounds and even manages to heal Harry's paternal emptiness by becoming his surrogate daughter.

Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love expands on the idea of passion, intimacy, and commitment as love's cornerstones. When all three of these elements are present, the fullest possible love blossoms, which Sternberg called *consummate love*. Depending on how the three elements are combined, other forms of love can be explained. The film provides some good examples.

In Bradley's relationship with Diana, he misses the intimacy that allows partners to truly know and support one another but feels passion and displays (one-sided) commitment. Sternberg called this *fatuous love*. In Bradley's marriage, he was completely committed but without passion or real intimacy; Sternberg called this *empty love*.

Harry and Esther represent *companionate love*—deeply intimate and committed but (at least from what we see in the film) lacking the heat of passion. Diana and her married lover have passion alone, and their infatuation is sustained by game playing, manipulation, and deprivation.

## Magical Endings

Viewers are given only superficial glimpses of the characters' histories in this film, and they are likewise not given any indicators of how the characters work through the impasses and conflicts that are usually necessary to achieve relational growth. Growth and healing seem to happen spontaneously and magically.

Diana's married lover's wife discovers his infidelity and leaves him, after which he realizes Diana is too precious to treat as a tryst. He suddenly commits to her, and she leaves Bradley to live happily ever after with him. In life, this is the least likely kind of union to survive and thrive; I am afraid this film may add fuel to the already dangerous false hopes of affair partners everywhere who are waiting for their married lovers to leave their spouses and commit to them.

Bradley's story gets a magic ending, too. After Diana crushes him, he self-mutilates to relieve the pain (not exactly a sign of readiness for mature love) and falls in love at first sight with the physician who sutures his hand. Rather than turn away from this obvious red flag, the doctor loves Bradley back with equal fervor, and he finally gets what he has always longed for. These endings are far too tidy, leaving viewers either turned off by the unrealistic resolutions or turned on by affirming the fantasy that love alone will conquer all.

While *Feast of Love* does serve up a few nutritious morsels, those lessons are padded with fast-food fillers that taste and smell good but can be harmful to one's relational health in the long run if mistaken for a balanced diet. Benton is capable of much more. He served up a true smorgasbord in *The Human Stain* (2003), which is a complex and layered portrait of love, loss, secrets, shame, damage, and redemption. Although unusually cast, *The Human Stain* gives us haunting and psychologically spot-on portrayals of how human hunger born of childhood wounds affects romantic attachments in the context of class, race, and culture. Perhaps Benton's next endeavor will raise the bar again.

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