

## The Love That Wasn't

A review of the film



### **Blue Valentine**

(2010)

Derek Cianfrance (Director)

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Reviewed by

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A painful, but generally accepted, truth is that romantic love and marriage do not always go together as intended. Sometimes one partner loves while the other one does not. However, this truth does not seem well researched by psychological science. We have research on compatibility in love styles (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Sternberg, 1986), on predictors for divorce, on marital satisfaction, on sexual desire incompatibility, and even on unrequited love in relationships that never begin (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Despite this broad focus on love and marriage, there is no clear research on marital relationships consisting of unequal romantic investment.

*Blue Valentine* is a difficult yet mesmerizing film to watch. It portrays the last days of a marriage juxtaposed with the sweet beginnings of the relationship. It has been popularly hailed as a film of two people, once passionately in love, whose love somehow dies over time. However, it seems equally, if not better, understood as a film portraying an unequal love that was never what it pretended to be.

Both Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams communicate the emotional dynamics between their characters, Dean and Cindy, with remarkable authenticity. The premarriage scenes are shot using 16mm film, creating a grainy, visual experience reminiscent of home movies that leads to an impression of unusual realism and intimacy.

The film begins with loss, a scene in which the family dog has gone missing due to Cindy's inattention. The emotional dynamics between the couple are evident at the outset as Dean implores Cindy to put on her seat belt and yells at a speeding driver who might harm his family, whereas Cindy downplays, ignores, and avoids Dean's expressions of caring. This foreshadows the dynamic that permeates their relationship, even from the beginning.

There are indications in their relationship that they are headed for a permanent rupture. Dean is often pushy or needy with Cindy and does not respond to her attempts at setting boundaries or asserting her needs. However, he is pushy because he feels rejected. Dean is highly emotionally volatile, with frequent rages and negative interpretations of Cindy's comments or explanations. His jealousy is poisonous to their marriage. Cindy responds to his neediness and anger with withdrawal and rejection, which infuriates him. *Blue Valentine* offers a few anecdotal bits of information that point to how unequal love may have been the foundation underscoring the difficult interactions between these two characters.

Prior to meeting Cindy, we see Dean lamenting that men love more than women. He insists that while men fall in love with and marry one particular girl because they feel they would be an idiot not to, women just get to a point in their lives where they pick the best option. He characterizes women as waiting their whole lives for Prince Charming, then marrying the guy who has a good job and is going to stick around.

This appears to parallel his own marriage to Cindy. Dean feels he fell in love with Cindy at first sight and that he already knew her, whereas Cindy is not as taken by Dean. When he orchestrates a way to run into her again, she doesn't seem interested. When Cindy ultimately reaches out to Dean, it is after she has a fight with her current boyfriend, whom she seems to love but who is also callous and self-centered.

Both Cindy and Dean have personal histories that inform their narratives about love and marriage. Both are damaged, yet in different ways, and have different fantasies about healing that damage. Dean is a high school dropout whose mother abandoned him when he was about 10 years old. He is left with a desire for love and family juxtaposed with a more conscious belief that this is not in his future.

Cindy, on the other hand, comes from an intact yet dysfunctional and conflicted home. Her father verbally abuses her passive mother. She does not see love in her parents' marriage. We learn at one point in the film that Cindy began having sexual intercourse at age 13 and has had about 20 partners by age 19 or so. She appears motivated to leave her parents' house but has personal experience with marriage that suggests it is conflict ridden and unsatisfying, based on practical choice rather than romance.

In fact, Cindy's motivation for marrying Dean seems to be primarily based on being pregnant and the coping involved with it. It also seems clear enough that Dean is not the biological father of her child. So, in line with each of their narratives about love and marriage, Cindy marries primarily for practical reasons whereas Dean marries (and parents a nonbiological child) for love and belonging.

This sets the stage for a spiraling, corrosive dynamic based on one partner's deep desire to have his love fully reciprocated and the other partner's frustration and disappointment with the choices she has made. In no time, we have a relational dynamic consisting of high levels of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling—all of the qualities that are predictive of an unhappy marriage and an early divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2002).

In the final 36 hours or so of their marriage, Dean is critical, attacking, and demanding. Cindy responds with thinly veiled contempt, defensive avoidance, and refusal to engage. Dean begs Cindy for affection rather than rejection, and Cindy seems overwhelmed, wanting to be anywhere but alone with Dean.

The watershed moment that pushes them to end the marriage is Dean's explosive anger when Cindy leaves the reparative one-night getaway that he had insisted they take. He confronts her at her workplace, gets in a physical fight with her boss, and refuses to leave or calm down. Cindy insists that neither she nor Dean can stop the damaging interactions they keep having or make things any better.

Although we can point to emotional dynamics such as these as being associated with early divorce, what has not been explored in the literature is why these dynamics may begin in the first place. What happens when one partner is in romantic love and the other is not? Under what circumstances does such a relationship survive and thrive, or devolve into wounding accusations and bitter disappointment? Social and clinical psychology would benefit from a focused exploration of both the realities and the consequences of unequal romantic love.

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