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*500 Days of Situationship: On Dichotomy, Development, and Interpretation*

Within the first three minutes of *500 Days of Summer* (2009), the narrator concedes, “This is a story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story”(500 *Days of Summer* 0:02-0:03). Yet since the 2009 release of the romantic comedy featuring hopeless romantic Tom Hansen and his former girlfriend Summer Finn, people have debated who was at fault in the relationship after Summer initiates a seemingly abrupt breakup. Analysis of two opposing interpretations of *500 Days of Summer* illustrates how the desire to label one of the main characters as the antagonist distracts from the relationship's intended complexity, supporting Susan Sontag's argument in “Against Interpretation” about how the demand for a singular finite interpretation takes away from art's full meaning.

Since the movie is presented mostly from Tom's perspective and swayed by his own view of their relationship, early viewers villainized Summer for defying expectations. While the crumbling of their relationship is revealed, Tom recounts memories of joy he spent with her: IKEA dates, going to the park, telling each other deeply personal stories. From his point of view, they were both satisfied with their situation and were in a happy relationship. So, when Summer ultimately breaks things off since she does not want to be in a relationship with him, Tom's bewilderment and irritation are projected onto the audience as well. They feel his emotions: both the euphoric feelings of being in love and the agony of heartbreak. As such, many viewers easily

adopted his view, and Summer became the villain seemingly leading Tom on. In the 2010s, people accepted this interpretation and concluded that Summer was a heartbreaker who ruined a successful relationship. This stance agrees with Sontag's idea that "interpretation makes art manageable, conformable" (Sontag 5). This commonly held viewpoint simplifies Summer's character into something "manageable" by turning her into an antagonist for rejecting Tom since her affections towards him were interpreted as an obligation to reciprocate his desire for commitment.

Since the release of the film, modern analysis of the movie has shifted to lessen fault from Summer and reject the former view, which is still a simplification. When the film is revisited, it is notable that Summer consistently told Tom her intentions in their situation, and her discomfort with commitment and labels. Recent reviews from the app Letterboxd repeat, "tom really is the villain of this film", and "summer was very clear about what she wanted since the beginning, it's not her fault that tom is dumb..." New discourse like this, over a decade after the original release of the movie, fights to combat the initial harsh criticism Summer faced and the unfair expectations held by original viewers of the time and rejects expectations based in misogyny placed upon Summer. Sontag describes this exact phenomenon in her essay: "In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art" (4). This idea of interpretation being used to reanalyse art to comply better with modern standards is exemplified by new viewers' refusal to leave the film with the 2010s harsh analysis of Summer and seek more critical commentary and exploration from the movie. As a result, the new interpretation asserts that Summer's affection does not equal any obligation to reciprocate Tom's

feelings or owe him a relationship. This new discourse is a direct response to the former view, which glorified Tom. While the new interpretation adds valuable contemporary discussion to the film and sheds light on a viewpoint formerly marginalized, it simplifies the overall relationship by existing only in extreme opposition to the former. As a result, the complex relationship with varying factors is turned into a black-and-white morality debate.

Both polarized interpretations simplify the film and overlook the complexity present in the relationship. The director of the film, Marc Webb, expressed, “In terms of its approach, because they know up front (because of the little note at the beginning) that something's a little bit off, they're more willing to engage the film on its own terms rather than just a romantic comedy. And hopefully that makes it more satisfying” (Webb). The movie strives to force spectators to sit with discomfort and absorb the scenes to come to their own takeaway. By picking a singular side, nuance and the complexity of the movie are lost. The intended ambiguity of the film has the potential to leave viewers pondering since they are uncertain of their interpretation of the relationship and can unpack the layers present. Webb’s goal in *500 Days of Summer* aligns with Sontag’s view on art as well: “In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art”(Sontag 5). Even as the general interpretation has morphed over time, both fight ambiguity and try to tame the work to fit a more palatable idea to viewers. The opposite viewpoints still hold valuable ideas that allow for viewers to assess values or expectations they may hold. But neither interpretation can ever entirely represent the uncertainty and imperfection in love when they refuse the other.

By insisting on a single antagonist, viewers have unknowingly demonstrated, for over a decade, Sontag's idea that the demand for a correct interpretation can subtract from an entire viewing experience and takeaways from art. The debate as to who was truly at fault reduces complex characters and oversimplifies a multifaceted relationship. Tom and Summer demonstrate the value in ambiguity and illustrate how interpretations can not always represent life's complexities. As people continue to revisit other works of media, *500 Days of Summer* demonstrates how interpretation offers valuable discussion, but is it important to welcome it with ongoing reflection to better understand levels of complexity in art.

### Works Cited

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