It’s Like Tiffany’s: Holly Golightly and the Personification of Christian Love

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A man stands inside the entrance of a New York apartment building, buzzing one of the units inside. The tenant, a young woman, is roused from her sleep and answers lazily. He explains that he is moving into the suite above hers but has been given the wrong key, and asks to use her phone. She lets him in, and he steps into a room largely devoid of furnishings and general organisation. He asks if she, too, has just recently moved in; she informs him that she has lived in the apartment for about a year, much to his surprise. As she searches for her telephone, a cat leaps up onto the man’s shoulder, then onto a bookshelf. The cat appears to be hers, although she insists that this is not entirely the case. “Poor slob without a name,” she coos as she picks the cat up.

“The way I see it, I haven’t got the right to give him one. We don’t belong to each other; we just took up one day by the river.” Balancing the cat over her head with one hand and retrieving a pair of shoes from the refrigerator with the other, she explains her situation to her semi-bewildered guest. “I don’t want to own anything until I find a place where me and things go together.” she insists. “I’m not sure where that is. but I know what it’s like.”

“It’s like Tiffany’s.”

The scene is from Blake Edwards’ 1961 Academy Award-winning film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, a silver-screen adaptation of Truman Capote’s novella of the same name. The man is George Peppard, in the role of aspiring writer Paul Varjak; the woman – who today remains one of the most iconic figures of 20th-century Americana – is the eccentric, naïve, and emotionally confused Holly Golightly, portrayed by actress Audrey Hepburn.

The conversation continues. “You know those days when you get the mean reds?” Holly asks.

“You mean, like the blues?”

She shakes her head. “The blues are because you’re getting fat and maybe it’s been raining too long.” She kneels down to place a vinyl in the player. “The mean reds are horrible, suddenly you’re afraid and you don’t know what you’re afraid of. Do you ever get that feeling?”

Paul shrugs. “Sure.”

“Well, when I get it, the only thing that does any good is to jump in a cab and go to Tiffany’s. Calms me down right away.” She takes a sip from a wineglass filled with milk. “If I could...
find a real-life place that'd make me feel like Tiffany's. Then – then I'd buy some furniture and give the cat a name!"

At first glance, Holly Golightly seems like nothing more than the typical female lead in a typical Hollywood romance. From the comedic nature of her behavioural quirks and the absurdity of her living conditions to the stark contrast between her extroverted flair and Paul's quiet composition, the nature of her presentation makes it difficult for anyone to take her entirely seriously. Yet audiences around the world have resonated on far more than a merely superficial level with the wayward character that Hepburn portrayed. There is something quite unique and universally appealing about Holly that demands not only sympathy, but understanding and admiration as well.

A closer reflection on her initial exchange with Paul sheds some light on the nature of her character's appeal. Beneath her outwardly carefree behaviour and philosophy, Holly is a personification of existential distress: her feelings of dislocation are indicative of a broader crisis of identity and purpose. Her anxiety – characterised by the “mean reds,” and from which she can find only temporary solace – is a very human and accessible condition. Throughout the film Holly struggles to find a source of clarity and permanence. The irony which makes her character so attractive and her story so memorable is that in many ways, she embodies the very thing she is looking for.

That "thing" is love.

Holly is a socialite on the New York scene, and Paul is a one-time writer who has arrived recently from Rome. As the two begin to interact, they discover that neither is entirely as they appear: Holly is, in fact, a high-profile call girl. While Paul is the beneficiary of an elder woman, for whom he provides similar services. In spite of their double lives – indeed, perhaps even because of them – and the oneone relationships that they are involved in, the two develop a close friendship, and Holly comes to refer to Paul as “Fred,” the name of her younger brother, whom Paul resembles. Paul is increasingly convinced of his feelings for her, but Holly is decidedly more enigmatic in her emotional responses, still hoping to capture the affections of rich men. After the two enjoy a day-long romance about town, he parts with his benefactress and intends to begin a committed relationship with Holly; but to his dismay, he learns that she has attached herself to a wealthy foreign aristocrat. Even when plans for marriage fall through, she attempts to leave the country to escape Paul, releasing the cat in an alley on the way to the airport. Paul furiously admonishes her inability to face love and accept its reality, and storms out of the cab, returning to the alley in the pouring
rain. To his surprise, he is joined by Holly; his love has finally prevailed upon her fear and stubborn ambition.

From a popular perspective, the reality of love is hardly a new revelation: the established cinematic tradition of romantic drama, which centres thematically on romantic relationships and the emotions that these relationships involve, attests to its centrality. This film in particular is awash with conventional love imagery and symbolism. Yet to these ideas, Holly brings a new vision of love, one which supersedes traditional representations of the attraction between genders. Her love is an amalgamation of all its parts: it is foreign and familiar, sexual and asexual, human and divine. Love, in Holly, celebrates and explores every instance and avenue of its own possibility.

But what if, in addition to recognising its holistic conception, we were to further qualify the vision of love in the film by positing that what we see in Holly is not simply love, but Christian love – that is, love as it pertains to and has been interpreted by the Christian religious tradition? The issue is immediately complicated: it is understandably difficult, for example, to speak of a Christian love of God’s love, exemplified in the character of a free-spirited, opportunistic call girl. Indeed, even before such questions can be considered, two fundamental concerns arise: why, on the one hand, are we led to create such associations with Christian love where they do not explicitly exist, and on the other, if we are to consider these associations, then what is our definition of Christian love?

Intrigueingly, the answers to both concerns stem from Matthew’s gospel account of Jesus’ declaration of the greatest commandments – to love God with heart, soul and mind, and to love neighbour as oneself. Alan Jacobs, in A Theology of Reading, describes this “law of love,” as it pertains to the interpretation of texts, and develops what he calls “the hermeneutics of love,” an interpretive method with an ultimate objective of love. In words borrowed from Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana, he suggests that any reading of a text which fails to build “charity,” or the double-love of God and of neighbour, fails to understand the text at all, while an interpretation that contributes to the building of charity “has not been deceived.” Regardless of whether it even agrees with the author’s original intent. As with any hermeneutic method, the intrinsic value or meaning of a text is not lost, and as a hermeneutic of love it strives to interpret the text lovingly and thus to protect its integrity; the rule is rather a means of assessing the interpretation. Provided that we commit ourselves to interpreting the text in a loving manner, a reading of themes of Christian love in the film is a valid subject for our discussion.
And how do we define Christian love? In *Works of Love*, Søren Kierkegaard draws on the passage from Matthew and chooses to emphasise love of neighbour, ultimately understanding it to be the means by which one is able to love God. He speaks specifically against the popular tendency within the tradition to deny self-love and espouse a self-annihilating love of others, citing the qualifying clause “as yourself” in the commandment as an explicit charge to the contrary. To Kierkegaard, “the law is, therefore: you shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbour when you love him as yourself.” Stephen Post elaborates on Kierkegaard’s thought by defining the notion of love “as communion between God, self, and other(s)… an inclusive triadic or three-term reciprocity.” For the purpose of our analyses we will employ Kierkegaard’s love theory, discussing Holly’s love for others in relation to her love of self, and subsequently attempt to reconcile our findings with Post’s notion of love as a triadic communion.

With an established theoretical approach, we ought to consider several of the myriad ways in which representations of love manifest themselves in the film. The first, which has already been discussed briefly, is of love as the encounter between strangers. The second concerns itself with love as sexual attraction, both implicit and overt. The final discussion will examine the divine and ultimately saving power of Holly’s love.

It seems odd to begin the discussion by suggesting that love should be in any way a reality between strangers. Does love not require a familiarity with and an understanding of its object? Perhaps it does not. Sarah York, in *The Holy Intimacy of Strangers*, discusses the tangible power and presence of love in an encounter between two people who meet for the first time. Love emerges as a product of “our human experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union”6: it forms bonds irrespective of conventional standards of relational status, and instead demands equally and of the entire human race that we “be present for one another on behalf of healing, cleansing, and freeing our imperfect selves.”7 Indeed, as York notes, some of our most remarkable and transformative experiences of love are in our interactions with strangers, whose relative detachment from our own lives afford us an objectivity that would otherwise be unavailable to us.8

Love between strangers is most evident in the experience of hospitality, which sociologist Parker Palmer describes as the process of “inviting the stranger into our private space.”9 The encounter and eventual bond of love between Holly and Paul is appropriately initiated by an act of hospitality – one which has both immediate and persisting effects. On the one hand, Holly is simply
inviting Paul into her apartment to use a telephone; on the other, she is beginning to invite him into the private recesses of her life, sharing with him an intimacy which he desperately lacks. In both cases Paul is given something that he needs, and the love demonstrated in this act of giving without having received first begins a dramatic and necessary transformation for both characters. York also identifies an additional dimension of hospitality as it pertains to strangers, suggesting that it is less about inviting someone in than about creating the opportunity to be invited in turn\textsuperscript{10}; certainly we see this faculty of hospitality in the next encounter between Holly and Paul, which takes place in Paul’s apartment. Intimacy between strangers does not become an end in and of itself, but also a means towards, and a vision of the potential for, a deeper and more permanent institution of love in the future.

The love between strangers, manifested and expressed in the act of hospitality, is, to York, rooted firmly in divine love and the revelation of God. “The Spirit reveals itself to us in our relationship with the world and its inhabitants,” she writes, adding that the holy intimacy between strangers “is an experience of the Spirit’s promise and power, breathed into human interaction.”\textsuperscript{11} York is not alone in this association. In \textit{Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers}, Elizabeth Newman suggests that hospitality is a unifying practice, and establishes a theoretical link with the sacrament of the Eucharist, which exemplifies the principle of hospitality in the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{12} Meanwhile, Arthur Sutherland defines it as an outworking of the integral components of the will of God – drawing correlations with the evangelical mission of the church – and concludes that hospitality “is the practice by which the church stands or falls.”\textsuperscript{13} These theologians elucidate a recurring theme of hospitality as participating in and fostering an awareness of the permeating reality of divine or transcendent love. Hospitable love, then, leads its participants to and is itself indicative of a more permanent and universal state of love, one which we are led to ultimately identify with the notion of God.

If we are to understand hospitable love as an initiation into a sustained, loving state, then sexual love – which we will treat as the love of attraction between senders, and not as a direct or erotic expression of the human sexual drive – can be seen as the means of its perpetuation. This is particularly true of the film, which, having established an initial attraction between Holly and Paul, develops their relationship in the context of romance.

It would be unfortunate to limit the understanding of sexual love to the largely uniform cultural conventions of sexuality that are more familiar. There are many different ways of
considering the sexual being in light of love, and of considering sexual attraction; Holly, as portrayed by Hepburn, is a particularly interesting blend of different and seemingly contradictory characteristics. Her physical beauty is unquestionable, and the nature of her character—the fact that she is a call girl—is an implicit iteration of her sexual being. At the same time, Hepburn's characterisation of the role is one of anti-sexuality, exemplifying subtlety, class, and a strong sense of naivety. Both sexuality and anti-sexuality are desirable qualities, and have the potential to be the basis of attraction, or else to contribute strongly to it.

Sexuality is not exclusive to the relationship between Holly and Paul; indeed, it seems that every heterosexual relationship in the film— including Holly's relationship with her neighbour, Mr. Yunioshi—is tinged with such attraction. This prevalence highlights the importance of sexual attraction as a mode of human relationship. But can sexuality and sexual attraction be part of a consideration of Christian love? In Sex and Love in the Bible, William Graham Cole observes that Christian scripture does not hesitate to analogise and even to equate sexual and divine love. He explains, for example, how Hosea used one word, besed, to describe both God's love for Israel and his own love for his wife, as if the prophet felt that the two were intrinsically related, and that they were ultimately demonstrations of the same facet of love. Likewise, the New Testament, when discussing the various dimensions of Christian love, uses the Greek term agape, which generally describes not human love but God's love. “This choice of words is not accidental,” he notes, “for the New Testament sees man's love for God and his neighbour primarily as a response to divine love.”

Thus there is a sense in which sexual love, as existing between lovers, is of the same type as divine love, and consequently quite pertinent to a discussion of love in the Christian tradition; yet sexual love is not established between Holly and Paul until the final scene of the film, and the majority of their on-screen relationship is one of sexual attraction. What, then, can be said of attraction? Is it possible to speak of it meaningfully, in the context of Christian love? In forming a theological approach to sexual relationships, Stanley I. Grenz argues the significance of sexual attraction by pointing out the fundamentally sexual nature of humanity. “To be sexual creatures entails being incomplete in ourselves,” since by participating in one sex we lack the attributes of the other, sexual attraction seeks to alleviate this predicament by effecting a sexual completion or wholeness, through union of opposing sexes. Ultimately, to Grenz, the objective of wholeness in
sexual or male-female attraction reflects the very character of God; as such, sexual attraction can be understood as a fundamental component of the triadic communion of love.

We have so far discussed two distinct facets of Christian love as they reveal themselves in Hollv. Hospitable love, the outworking of love between strangers, is embodied in her initial encounter with and kindness towards Paul; sexual love, which emerges out of the attraction between sexes, becomes the vessel of their developing relationship. Our third and final discussion, then, focuses on what is arguably the most prevalent theme in the entire film: that love, as experienced and exemplified by Hollv, is a love that saves.

This concept of saving love has its precedent in the work of Peter Abelard, the 13th century French philosopher and theologian. Thomas Williams notes that Abelard’s theory of atonement rejects the popular perspective that Christ’s death was enacted in order to purchase humanity back from the devil: instead Abelard posits that the motivation for Christ’s death was an unselfish love. Salvation, in other words, was motivated by and only by love. and the means by which salvation was achieved – the Passion of Christ. according to Abelard – was in itself the ultimate revelation of God’s love. and of his loving character.16

What is meant by “salvation” in the context of our discussion, however, is somewhat distinct from the Christian concepts of redemption, atonement, and justification. Such notions refer to a system of salvation, wherein particular cosmic presuppositions are made and then addressed by means of different metaphors of action: salvation itself can simply be described as the state of being saved. There are two integral factors of salvation that we must consider at this point: first, that the notion of “being saved” implies a complete reversal or change of state from bad to good fortune: and second, that salvation is enabled in, or otherwise effected by, someone or something other than and external to the one being saved.

Thus when we speak of a love that saves, we speak of an external love that causes a complete transformation of its subject. This is the saving quality of Hollv’s love; her intervention into Paul’s life alerts him to the bleak reality of his own situation, and moves him to a fundamental transformation. We also see the salvific power of Paul’s own love for Hollv, which motivates him to change himself. Unlike the loves of hospitality and sexuality, saving love has no particular corresponding action by which its presence in the film can be discerned; we know it only by the fruits of its labour, the metamorphosis that Paul undergoes when he finally commits to loving self and other equally by pursuing his dream of writing and giving his affections to Hollv.
But is her love for Paul the only instance of saving love in the film? In answering this question we come to our final consideration of love in the character of Holly Golightly. We realise that, in spite of the life-changing influence she has on Paul, her own life has been and continues to be in a state of disarray. She is a physical and emotional wanderer, moving constantly and affixing herself to a bewildering assortment of men, while never once settling in one place and with one person for very long. A busy social life and a steady income for her services conceal her pervading sense of homelessness and her lack of self-identity. She wants nothing more than to settle and be happy, and she even seeks to fulfill her ambitions and desires by involving herself with wealthy men: yet happiness eludes her, and she finds herself caught in a perpetual cycle of failed relationships, romantic and otherwise. Ironically, the saving love that Holly offers to Paul is the very thing that she herself needs.

The truth is that Holly is not alone. She exemplifies a very human struggle: the search for accommodation, for completion, for congruence of the self with its own sense of purpose. She is not alone in her naïve hope that life can and ought to be better than it is. Her search for love is one which supersedes conventional boundaries of understanding, and one which has a very universal, fundamentally human appeal.

She may not have known where salvation was, but throughout the film Holly certainly has a sense of her need for it. It is ultimately Paul’s saving love which finally connects with and transforms her. In the closing shot of the film, as she is wrapped in the arms of Paul’s loving embrace, both she and the audience know that she has finally found the place she was looking for.

It’s like Tiffany’s.

Notes

1 Premiere Magazine, in its April 2004 issue, named Holly Golightly the 32nd greatest movie character of all time.
2 Matthew 22:34-40.
7 York, 134.
8 York, 5.
10 York, 163.
11 York, 4.
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Bibliography