

His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks, 1940)

“His Girl Friday” illustrates a genre popular in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the screwball comedy, characterized by

- A combination of slapstick with fast-paced repartee
- plot involving courtship and marriage or remarriage (a “sex comedy without the sex”)
- a leading female character who can hold her own with the men

Notable examples of the genre from its classic period include:

Screwball Comedies
It Happened One Night (1934), d. Frank Capra
Twentieth Century (1934), d. Howard Hawks
Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936), d. Frank Capra
My Man Godfrey (1936), d. Gregory LaCava
The Awful Truth (1937), d. Leo McCarey
Bringing Up Baby (1938), d. Howard Hawks
Holiday (1938), d. George Cukor
You Can't Take It with You (1938), d. Frank Capra
His Girl Friday (1940), d. Howard Hawks
My Favorite Wife (1940), d. Garson Kanin
The Philadelphia Story (1940), d. George Cukor
Arsenic and Old Lace (1944), d. Frank Capra

What is the story about?

An ace newspaper reporter, planning to quit journalism for marriage, thwarted by her editor/ex-husband, whom she unconsciously still loves, realizes she is really a “newspaperman.”

Films frequently represent adaptations from other mediums. The screenplay of “Stagecoach” was adapted from a short story. “His Girl Friday” comes from a play called “The Front Page,” written by two former Chicago newspaper reporters, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, in 1928. “His Girl Friday” is actually the second screen adaptation of the play, the first appearing in 1931. “His Girl Friday” makes several important alterations to the structure of the play, most notably transforming the central relationship from a conflict between two men into a romantic conflict between a man and a woman.

How do you know that this is what it is about?

“An ace newspaper reporter, planning to quit journalism for marriage”
Both film and play have an ace reporter quitting a newspaper in the midst of a breaking story, the hanging of a convicted cop-killer.

Play (“The Front Page”)	Film (“His Girl Friday”)
	Part 1: Prologue: Hildy arrives at newsroom with her fiancé, Bruce Baldwin. We learn about the Earl Williams story and Hildy informs Walter of her intention to

	leave with Bruce on the four o'clock train. Walter takes Hildy and Bruce to lunch.
Act I: Newsroom buzzes with talk of the impending hanging of convicted cop-killer, Earl Williams. Hildy announces his intention to get married and leave the newspaper business. Ends with news of Earl Williams' escape.	Part 2: Introduction to the pressroom and the reporters, who await the hanging of Earl Williams. Ends with Earl Williams' escape.
Act II: Earl Williams appears in the pressroom and Hildy and Mollie hide him in a desk. When the reporters return and press for an explanation, Mollie jumps out the window.	Part 3: F
Act III: The Sheriff, discovering Earl Williams' gun, handcuffs Walter and Hildy. A messenger appears with a stay of execution from the Governor. Walter sends Hildy on his way with a pocket watch as a present, then calls to arrange for his arrest for its theft.	Part 4: The discovery of Williams in the desk, the arrival of Williams' reprieve, and the resolution of the conflict between Walter and Hildy.

In comparing the play to the movie, we notice three main alterations:

- changing the gender of the ace reporter
- adding a Prologue that puts the romantic relationship ahead of the story of the impending hanging
- adding Hildy's interview with Earl Williams

In order to understand these changes we need to consider the philosophy of director Howard Hawks. Hawks considered vocation to be the essential value in life. In a Hawks movie it is impossible to separate profession and personality. For Hawks true personal fulfillment comes through complete vocational fulfillment. "When Walter and Hildy play the newspaper game together they are both most alive, most energetic, most in touch with themselves and with each other, most spiritedly human."

Hawks movies have stories based on two characters, apparently mismatched, who turn out in the end to be allies. "The very structure of a Howard Hawks narrative requires a central pair of characters who, at its beginning, seem to be warring opposites but who by its end, realize that they are somehow alike. The clashing opposites discover they are spiritual partners, extensions of one another, complements not antagonists."

Hawks tells his stories through the physical relationship between the characters and the objects that surround them. The action and interaction with objects forms an essential part of Hawks' storytelling technique.

Finally, Hawks likes stories about a character making a discovery that the audience has discovered already. We know from the first scene that Hildy and Walter belong together, even though it takes the whole film for Hildy to discover it.

"thwarted by her editor/ex-husband"

Walter, learning that he has only four hours before Hildy will leave town, the newspaper, and his life, tries everything in his power (both fair and, more frequently, underhanded), to change her mind. He:

- offers Hildy a higher salary to return to the newspaper
- deliberately mistakes Bruce for an old man in the waiting room, and then mocks Bruce's over preparedness for bad weather when it's a perfectly fair day
- at lunch makes fun of the couple's plan to live in Albany with Bruce's mother. Walter's veiled insults cause Hildy to kick him repeatedly under the table.
- tells Hildy that Sweeney, his only other reporter capable of handling the Earl Williams story, is looking after his wife who has delivered triplets. (Hildy remembers that Sweeney has been married only four months).
- offers to buy a life insurance policy from Bruce—the medical exam will delay their departure—provided Hildy writes the Earl Williams story. Hildy calculates the commission on the policy and instructs Bruce to take him up on it, but she demands a certified check from Walter.
- arranges for Bruce to get arrested for supposedly stealing a watch from Diamond Louie, Walter's henchman. (Louie also pickpockets Bruce's wallet, hoping to get Walter's check back.) When Hildy learns of the manipulation, she noisily tears up the story she had drafted.
- sends Louie's girlfriend Benji to get Bruce arrested again by claiming that he was a "masher." Then he sends Louie with \$450 of counterfeit money to deliver to Hildy.
- pretends to be pushing Hildy off to Albany when Bruce telephones to say that he has been arrested again for possessing counterfeit money.

“whom she unconsciously still loves”

We have mentioned how Howard Hawks tells stories through the relationships between characters and objects. In “His Girl Friday” the telephone represents Hildy's essential link to Walter, and as we view the clips I ask you to keep a careful watch on the telephone—that indispensable tool of the newspaper reporter.

- In the first scene in Walter's office we see two symmetrically placed telephones on his desk, which echo the symmetry of Walter's and Hildy's bodies in Hawks's frame.
- Hildy, angry with Walter's machinations, rips the telephone from the wall.
- In the pressroom, Hildy races back and forth between two telephones: one that links her with Bruce (in jail again) and the other that links her with Walter (in his office).
- Second episode with two telephones—after Hildy hangs up Bruce's phone to continue speaking softly with Walter, Bruce's phone topples over, implying the beginning of his collapse in her affections.

“realizes she is really a ‘newspaperman.’”

Hawks employs another object, in this case Hildy's coat, to represent her developing awareness of her unbreakable bond with Walter.

- After lunch at the restaurant, Walter, in his typical ungentlemanly way, does not help Hildy with her coat, but Bruce does.
- When Hildy asserts her farewell to the newspaper game, she is unable to put her coat on properly because she has unknowingly stuck her right arm in its left sleeve, and, rather than calmly and rationally extricate this errant arm, she irrationally continues jamming the arm down the wrong sleeve. The coat sleeve is a simple Hawks object that conveys more about Hildy's mind and feelings—the fact that she is literally at war with herself—than all her words.
- After Earl's escape, Hildy reveals the triumph of her newspaperman's instincts when, her back to the camera, she slowly takes the coat off. This physical gesture conveys her decision to stay.
- In the last scene Walter hands Hildy her coat in a meretricious attempt to send her on her way

In the clips that follow, keep an eye out for the ways in which Hawks sets up a deliberate conflict between the visual and the auditory. Hildy's words proclaim her intention to leave Walter and the newspaper business. But every visual clue tells the audience—long before Hildy figures it out—that she and Walter are firmly wedded, even though legally divorced. In particular, I direct your attention to framing (what the director chooses to let us see), camera angle, camera movement, action, sound (not the words on the page, but how they are spoken), and editing. Let me warn you in advance, the pace of this film is extremely rapid.

Clip 1 (#1 Start; #2 Lord of the Universe, 14:46)

- **Camera movement:** Three long tracking shots—the newsroom and its inhabitants (reporters, copyboys, switchboard operators); Hildy's passage through the newsroom; her return following Walter. Bruce's appearance brings the camera movement to a dead stop.
- **Actions:** Hildy and Walter move the same way (“The two apparent antagonists ... rove about the office in the same rhythm as they speak, including a masterful moment when Hildy, without missing a verbal beat, tosses her purse at Walter's head from behind, and he, without either seeing it or missing a verbal beat, ducks the throw perfectly and tells her that her arm used to be better, then answers his telephone without losing a beat. When they sit down, they sit close to one another on a desk, shoulder to shoulder, in precisely the same attitudes their bodies touching slightly but chummily, captured by a symmetrical framing which makes them perfect physical and hence spiritual halves of the same visual frame. Everything over which Hildy has no control—the pace and inflections of her voice, the movements of her body, her posture, her physical position in the frame—refutes the surface claims of her words.”)
- **Sound:** Hildy and Walter speak at the same rapid tempo. Rosalind Russell, playing Hildy, speaks in a baritone voice at the same pitch as Cary Grant, playing Walter. Bruce, by contrast, speaks very slowly, and clearly has no place in this environment (as underlined by gate and the “No Admittance” sign). Notice the change in Hildy's tone of voice when she talks about getting married. She talks fast but stumbles when she tries to explain her upcoming marriage.

- **Framing:** “In shot after shot of His Girl Friday, Hildy and Walter occupy the same frame in perfectly balanced symmetrical compositions, implying the essential harmony and complementarity of the two regardless of their verbal warfare.”

Clip 2 (#3 Lunch with Walter, 9:23)

- **Framing:** Walter takes Bruce’s chair, then sits between Hildy and Bruce. Hawks uses two-shots to emphasize how Walter is separating the two, or three-shots in which Walter and Hildy face the same way, Bruce with his back to the camera.
- **Actions:** Walter and Hildy smoke (she lights his cigarette), Bruce does not; Walter and Hildy share a laugh about Albany and Sweeney’s imaginary twins; Walter and Hildy take rum in their coffee, Bruce does not

Clip 3 (#6 Earl Williams Interview, 2:41)

- **Angle:** high shot emphasizes Earl in cage-like captivity
- **Actions:** Hildy’s skill as a reporter (bribing the jailer in order to get the story) and her qualities as a woman (Hildy’s voice becomes soft, slow, and sympathetic, drawing Williams out in a way a male reporter might not). “The camera frames the two of them. Neither the camera nor the characters move during the remainder of the conversation. The camera’s judicious intimacy and delicacy mirrors Hildy’s own sensitive response to this condemned man whom she is going to use (she wants her story) but not abuse or make feel used.” Williams is easily manipulated: he takes a cigarette from Hildy even though he doesn’t smoke.

Clip 4 (#9 Watch Thief, 3:26)

- **Actions:** Hildy uses telephone to make Walter listen to her tearing up the story; Hildy proves unable to put on her coat or locate her hat, actions that betray her words; Hildy tears the telephone (her connection with Walter) out of the wall

Clip 5 (#11 Jail Break, 6:23)

- **Actions:** Hildy takes off her coat, assures Walter “I’m on the job”; Hildy chases and tackles a deputy in order to learn how Earl got the gun that enabled his escape; notice the expression on Hildy’s face as she recounts the gun story to Walter
- **Editing:** Montage (a series of short shots edited into a sequence to condense time) to capture the excitement of the jailbreak, the reporters’ calls and the police response

Clip 6 (#12 Masher, 1:18)

- **Actions:** Hildy dashes back and forth between two telephones; Ralph Bellamy joke—Walter and the storyteller in an “in” joke—Ralph Bellamy is the actual actor playing Bruce Baldwin; Walter’s machinations: the floozy and the counterfeit money

Clip 7 (#15 Earl Drops In, 5:34)

- **Actions:** Hildy's second episode with two telephones, at the end of which the phone on which she has been talking to Bruce falls over

Clip 8 (#19 Out on bail, 2:41)

- **Actions:** Verbal trio: Walter on telephone, Hildy madly typing, Bruce in the middle, helpless and useless (in fact, Hildy types his words into the article by mistake)

Clip 9 (#25 Apprehending Williams, :47)

- **Camera movement:** "As the police lead Earl out of the pressroom and back to his cell, Hawks accomplishes a dazzling synthesis of physical motion, visual continuity and verbal commentary. Earl's walk manages to put each of the successive descriptions by the reports into the same frame with the retiring prisoner."

Clip 9 (#28 Noble Walter?, 4:43)

- **Actions:** Walter, trying to persuade Hildy to leave with Bruce, hands her her coat; Hildy comes to her senses at last, but the proposed honeymoon with Walter may never happen

In addition to the overt humour of the action, Hawks has included a number of in jokes.

- The name of Ralph Bellamy (actually the person playing the role of Bruce Baldwin)
- Walter tells Earl Williams, "Get back in there, you Mock Turtle," referring to the role that Cary Grant played in the 1933 movie version of "Alice in Wonderland."
- "The last person to call me that was Archy Leach," Cary Grant's actual name
- The fanny joke: Their work is play, of course, and Hildy as straight "man" hands Walter the opportunity to improvise yet another Hawks "tail" joke. "What's the name of the mayor's first wife?" Hildy asks. Then Walter, "the one with the wart on her? (pause) Fanny." Without the pause Hawks would never get this "tail" gag past the censors.

Modern viewers troubled by the apparent sexism in the treatment of the Hildy character, may be interested in this comment by Gerald Mast: "Hildy's submissiveness at the end may be disquieting unless we view it as a comic punishment for her original comic sin. She is paying for her mistake of not knowing herself, not knowing life, not knowing the meaning of personal fulfillment, destroying her happiness (and, by the way, Walter's) by trying to divorce herself from both a person and from a vocation which she requires in order to survive. Hildy and Walter are a matched spiritual set who can only live fully as individuals by living fully as complements. There is no gulf between a personal need (a home) and a professional need (work) because (for Hawks anyway) work is a personal need."

Quotations from “*Twentieth Century and His Girl Friday*,” in Gerald Mast (1982).
Howard Hawks: Storyteller. New York: Oxford University Press.