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The Fifth Avenue Anti-Stuffed Shirt and Flying Trapeze Club:  
A Reading of George Cukor's *Holiday*



Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn in *HOLIDAY*  
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Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what people think...you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion...but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

Apart from the wish for selfhood...I do not understand the value of art.

—Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*

The 1938 film *Holiday* occupies an underappreciated position within the genre study that Stanley Cavell undertakes in his book, *Pursuits of Happiness*. Adapted from the Philip Barry play and directed by George Cukor, *Holiday* is a filmic meditation on the trope of self-reliance and the perennial American tension between lofty Romantic longings and the cold pragmatics of wealth. The films that Cavell identifies in his 1981 work form a genre—comedies of remarriage—which takes up the Romantic questions of American transcendentalism by filtering them through the societal landscape of Depression-era

America. These questions concern the creation of selfhood, the knowledge procured through discourse and recognition, the experience of American culture, and the protofeminist entanglements of women in the first decades of the twentieth century. These films pose questions *to America about America* and, as Cavell shows, they represent an iteration of our American intellectual inheritance.

My aim in this paper is to situate *Holiday* within the genre of remarriage comedies because, as I will demonstrate, *Holiday* deftly confronts the themes Cavell takes to be requisite for inclusion in the genre, and further, *Holiday* functions as an artistic commentary on two competing inheritances of the American intellectual tradition. The aesthetic interest in *Holiday* is thus an interest in our communal experience of America, in the recurring sociopolitical concerns of our country, and in the position early-American film occupies as an interlocutor within the Great Conversation. I will begin by briefly summarizing the film itself and then proceed to outline the pertinent claims Cavell makes in *Pursuits of Happiness*. This will allow us to discern how *Holiday* functions as a heretofore unnoticed instance of the genre, which will in turn lead us to see how the film is saturated by an Emersonian mood (to borrow Cavell's phrasing). I contend that *Holiday* is a classic American art object that uses its narrative to confront the tensions between attaining wealth and pursuing self-knowledge, and that *Holiday* therefore deserves appropriate aesthetic attention, even seventy-three years after its release.

#### §1 SITUATING *HOLIDAY* AS A REMARRIAGE COMEDY

Because *Holiday* is a relatively obscure film a brief synopsis is in order. On the surface, the story follows the came-from-nothing young idealist Johnny Case (Cary Grant) who is recently engaged to Manhattan society daughter Julia Seton (Doris Nolan). Julia endeavors—with the approbation of her tycoon father—to disabuse Johnny of his desire to quit working and take a holiday. As Johnny puts it, he wishes to “retire young, work old.”<sup>1</sup> This holiday is not a mere vacation; it is Johnny's chance to explore the “new and exciting” ideas of his America; it is his opportunity to discover a life beyond the accumulation of capital. While Julia attempts to mold Johnny into a docile capitalist archetype, Johnny undergoes a series of existential affirmations that concretize his radical desire. Johnny is assisted in these affirmations by the black-sheep sister of the Seton family (Katherine Hepburn as Linda Seton), the affably soused brother-in-law-to-be (Lew Ayres as Ned Seton), and his long-time intellectual friends (Edward Everett Horton and Jean Dixon as Professor Nick Potter and Susan Potter). Johnny attempts to remain faithfully engaged to Julia throughout the film by capitulating to the progressively larger stipulations being thrust onto him at the expense of his own dreams. In the end, Johnny realizes that he cannot allow Julia's demands to usurp his self-fulfillment: “I guess I love being free even more than I love you, Julia.” Johnny boards an ocean liner with Nick and Susan, bound for the eponymous holiday, and Linda joins Johnny just in time to consummate their romance (with a kiss)—a romance that has been implicitly developing throughout the film.

To see how *Holiday* aligns with Cavell's genre study we must first explicate the general contours of his project. Cavell begins *Pursuits of Happiness* by describing the critical distinction, made by Northrop Frye, between old comedy and new comedy—both being forms of romantic comedy centered on a young couple who, before the inevitable conclusion of marriage, must overcome “individual and social obstacles to their happiness.”<sup>2</sup> Shakespearean romantic comedies, such as *A Winter's Tale*, are at the forefront of this conception. Cavell takes the Hollywood comedy of remarriage to be more closely aligned with old comedy (in the vein of the Bard) because of its “stress on the heroine, who may

hold the key to the successful conclusion of the plot...and who may undergo something like death and restoration.”<sup>3</sup> New comedy focuses more on the male’s obstructed attainment of the woman, hindered by the obligatory senex figure, usually an older male, such as a father or uncle. However, Cavell stresses that the remarriage comedy is distinct from both descriptions since the heroine is usually married, engaged, or has been previously married, and the drive of the plot “is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*.”<sup>4</sup> This feature of reconnection is vital for situating *Holiday* as a remarriage comedy. The film’s diegetic thrust is precisely to (re)unite the central pair of Johnny and Linda. (Their reunion is engendered by the shared past they create—another integral aspect of the genre—about which I will say more shortly.) Johnny and Linda are threatened not with divorce but with permanent separation by Johnny’s impending marriage to Julia. Johnny and Linda are undoubtedly the “central pair”—their chemistry is unmistakable even if you are unaware of Grant and Hepburn’s shared silver-screen past—and from their first appearance on screen together (Linda interrupts Johnny and Julia necking in the house elevator) the film implores us to wish for their union, to hope they will overcome the obstacle to their happiness that is Julia Seton.

From the outset *Holiday* presents a dual threat to marriage indicative of the themes Cavell is illuminating: Johnny’s engagement to Julia is threatened by his obvious rapport with Linda, and the union of Johnny and Linda is threatened by the preexistent engagement. While literal remarriage does not define *Holiday* in the same way that it defines other films of the genre (*The Awful Truth*, *The Philadelphia Story*), the underlying threat of disunion—specifically, as regards a prior engagement—compensates for this absence and aligns *Holiday* with other remarriage comedies that focus on non-nuptial relationships (*His Girl Friday*, *Bringing Up Baby*).<sup>5</sup>

*Holiday* amalgamates the tropes of old and new comedy: Johnny pursues Julia impeded by her father’s demands (new comedy), while Linda represents the successful conclusion of the plot and undergoes a rebirth through Johnny (old comedy). (Linda’s death began years ago, as she was alienated by the cold marble and the “frightful ghosts with stuffed shirts and mink-lined ties.” Further, after their first meeting Linda dubs Johnny the “*life* that walked into the house this morning.”) Yet, the film also distinguishes itself from either epithet by its central motivation of reunion, the key characteristic of the remarriage comedy.

The first sequences of the film illustrate how ill suited Julia and Johnny are for each other. First, Johnny assumes Julia works at the Seton Estate as he enters through the servants’ quarters to make their scheduled meeting. Next, Julia recurrently disapproves of Johnny’s bow-tie—a metaphor for his outsider status that is momentarily remedied during the New Year’s Eve party as he dons a white tie and tails: Julia swoons with plutocratic delight. Further, Julia’s first on-screen words to Johnny are matronly and degrading to his independent spirit: “Johnny, mind your manners...you promised to change that tie...oh, that hair.”

These opening sequences also establish an element besides the romantic incongruity of Johnny and Julia that is important both for linking *Holiday* with the remarriage comedy genre and for grounding the conversation about America that I will explore in the latter portion of this paper. Questions of wealth and success—What is the purpose of money in life? How much money is desirable? What constitutes success? etc.—are posed from the opening scene and are the central focus of Johnny and Julia’s first conversation. The film opens with Johnny’s attempt to drop off his luggage at the Potter’s apartment, as he has just returned from Lake Placid (where he and Julia met, ten days ago), so he can rush to see Julia before she informs Father of their perfunctory engagement.<sup>6</sup> The Potters question Johnny about his fiancée and jest about her supposed penury, as Johnny “can’t describe her” beyond

saying that “she wants the life I want, the home I want,” a myopic depiction soon falsified by Julia herself. In the next scene, as Johnny waits for Julia in the Seton Estate—he shouts “Judas!” upon entering the marble-pillared foyer—he is dumbfounded by the immense wealth (multiple drawing rooms, an elevator, dual stair cases). And what the house represents becomes their first topic of conversation (JOHNNY: “Darling, where are we?” JULIA: “Where I live.” JOHNNY: “You must all be so rich.”). In a tone similar to the one she takes later about the excitement of business and the thrill of making money, Julia assures Johnny that he will soon be making millions himself, to which Johnny curtly responds: “Oh no I’m not.” The conversations of these opening scenes thus establish the question of wealth; the question which both implicates *Holiday* in, and distinguishes it from, the genre of remarriage comedy; the question that will come to define Johnny Case’s pursuit of happiness.

The films that Cavell identifies as Hollywood comedies of remarriage, though set squarely in Depression-era America, primarily take place among “settings of unmistakable wealth” and are populated by characters that “have the leisure to talk about human happiness.”<sup>7</sup> These settings of wealth, while a shared attribute of the genre, are nowhere treated as self-reflexively as in *Holiday*. By this I mean that in none of the other films Cavell considers does the pursuit of and/or possession of money motivate the narrative action as it does in *Holiday*.<sup>8</sup> The main conflict of the film concerns whether or not Johnny will capitulate to Julia’s nuptial demands, take a job at Seton Bank, and make those aforementioned millions. If Johnny agrees to the life Julia and Father desire for him it means forgoing his holiday, surrendering to societal demands, and usurping his endlessly seeking spirit with the cold logic of capital (Emerson’s words suggest themselves already: “Our occupations...we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us”).<sup>9</sup> The recurring fiscal questions *Holiday* poses, to Johnny and to us, are as Cavell claims, “invariably tropes for spiritual issues.”<sup>10</sup> These issues are most generally defined by happiness, and Cavell voices one of Johnny’s bourgeois motivations when he notes, “the achievement of human happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs.”<sup>11</sup> Johnny has already gained the requisite wealth that allows him to ponder these spiritual issues, and he is dissatisfied with the better-faster-fuller mentality of further achievement. Unmistakable wealth is thus not merely the setting of *Holiday*; its ostensible attainment represents the spiritual struggle at the heart of the story. That is, Johnny’s struggle towards self-reliance is bound up in his attempts to break free from the proprietary dictates of American oligarchy. It is this pointed economic focus that, while a shared attribute of the genre, is what also separates *Holiday* from other remarriage comedies.

## §2 WEALTH OR ROMANCE? OBLIGATION OR EXPERIENCE?

The threat of disunion motivates the romance of *Holiday*, but it is the question of wealth wherein the spiritual issues that plague Johnny are bound. As such, *Holiday* shares an interesting thematic similarity with W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* as well as with the remarriage comedy. This similarity suggested itself to me during Johnny and Linda’s first conversation. This scene takes place in the upstairs playroom of the Seton Estate, the only comfortable room in the house, the only place where Linda feels alive.<sup>12</sup> Their conversation is about self-authorship, about leading one’s own life; in Cavell’s words, “of what it is to have an interest in your own experience.”<sup>13</sup> Johnny tells Linda that he wouldn’t call what he’s been doing “living” (Johnny has been working in finance). He wants to “find out why [he’s] working” because he knows that “the answer can’t just be to pay bills

and pile up more money.” This scene is reminiscent of another remarriage comedy trait Cavell describes as “a passage...in which one or both of the principals try a hand at an *abstract* formulation of their predicament,”<sup>14</sup> though within the freedom of the playroom their formulations are terribly exact. Johnny and Linda are articulating their disillusion, sharing solace in their societal discontent (Linda tells Johnny: “Case, compared to the life I lead, the last man in a chain gang thoroughly enjoys himself”). Here, Johnny presents his most lucid description of his motivations:

JOHNNY: The world is changing out there, there are a lot of new and exciting ideas running around; some of them might be right and some of them might be cockeyed but they are affecting all our lives. I want to know where I stand, how I fit into the picture, what it’s all going to mean to me. I can’t find that out sitting behind some desk...I want to save part of my life for myself...retire young, work old, come back when I know what I’m working for. Does that make sense to you?

LINDA: That makes a lot of sense.<sup>15</sup>

This conversation shares a deep similarity to an exchange in *The Razor’s Edge* wherein Larry attempts to tell his fiancée, Isabel, why he has moved to Europe, forsaken the life of finance waiting for him in America, and endeavored to discover himself through the “acquisition of knowledge,” to which Isabel dully replies: “It doesn’t sound very practical.”<sup>16</sup> Larry, in words Johnny Case might have uttered in a more philosophical mood, explains to Isabel what answers he hopes to find:

I see vast lands of the spirit stretching out before me, beckoning, and I’m eager to travel them...I want to make up my mind whether God is or God is not. I want to find out why evil exists. I want to know whether I have an immortal soul or whether when I die it’s the end.<sup>17</sup>

Isabel is at a loss to understand. She tells Larry he has forgotten “how thrilling life is in America today” and poses a thoroughly Kantian question to him: “What would happen to America if everyone shirked as you’re shirking?”<sup>18</sup> And in terms Johnny Case could easily understand (Maugham’s book was published in 1943, and he may certainly have seen his friend Cukor’s film),<sup>19</sup> Larry rebuffs the Kantian critique in a self-reliant vein:

The answer to that is that everyone doesn’t feel like me. Fortunately for themselves, perhaps, most people are prepared to follow the normal course; what you forget is that I want to learn as passionately as—Gray [her soon-to-be husband], for instance, wants to make pots of money. Am I really a traitor to my country because I want to spend a few years educating myself? It may be that when I’m through I shall have something to give that people will be glad to take...if I fail I shall be no worse off than a man who’s gone into business and hasn’t made a go of it.<sup>20</sup>

Larry Darrell has already taken his holiday and yet must continue to defend his nonconformity against the American dream of affluence. Johnny Case has not yet had his opportunity to sail; he is still in the process of voicing his dream, of authoring the life he has chosen. Linda Seton understands Johnny’s dream in a way her sister Julia never will. Julia

and Isabel suffer from the same blind adherence to propriety, and their men are impotent to alter those convictions. Johnny Case and Larry Darrell share the desire to extricate themselves from societal dictates; they have taken up the struggle for self-trust and have thereby taken over a thoroughly American ideal. Emerson championed this ideal and in his essay "Circles" gives voice to a spiritual struggle many Americans have pursued at the expense of their fiscal obligations:

One man thinks justice consists in paying debts...[a] second man has his own way of looking at things; asks himself Which debt must I pay first, the debt to the rich, or the debt to the poor? the debt of money, or the debt of thought to mankind, of genius to nature? For you, O broker, there is no other principle but arithmetic. For me, commerce is of trivial import: love, faith, truth of character, the aspiration of man, these are sacred.<sup>21</sup>

Johnny Case questions his existence with an Emersonian disposition and has found the language to author his own experience; Linda Seton has found that language as well. For Johnny the word is "holiday," for Linda the word is "Johnny." For Johnny and Linda those words articulate the spirit that has been sapped by the pursuit of wealth. Those words represent a newfound trust in their own experience, an avenue towards self-authorship.

Cavell finds this interest in experience to be an American inheritance of transcendentalism and a further feature of the remarriage comedy: "Encouraged by [Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau], one learns that without this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it[,]...one is without authority in one's own experience."<sup>22</sup> Linda and Johnny share this longing for experience; their relationship is an authorship; they affirm *authority* over their existence by removing themselves from the society that has stifled their pursuits of happiness. In the playroom of the Seton Estate (the scene of the conversation which began our current exploration) Johnny and Linda create a shared past and thereby create a foundation for their new selves. The playroom represents the heart and hearth of the house, where a fire is always burning, where the musical instruments are all in tune, and where catharsis occurs in the form of Punch and Judy shows and circus-style acrobatics. Insofar as *Holiday* can be implicated in the genre of remarriage comedy we can understand the playroom as the site of Johnny and Linda's shared created past and their newly created humanity. Cavell understands the remarriage comedy genre to "require the creation of a new woman, or the new creation of a woman...a new creation of the human."<sup>23</sup> Cavell expands this point in his essay on *The Philadelphia Story*; his description of how remarriage comedies create a new woman is as much in line with how *Holiday* approaches the creation of Linda Seton's identity as it is with how *The Philadelphia Story* approaches Tracy Lord's: "This description is meant...to characterize an emphasis taken by the narrative on the question of the heroine's identity...[The remarriage comedy's] power...to determine what becomes of these women on film—is what permits the realization of these narrative structures as among the highest achievements in the art of film."<sup>24</sup>

Throughout *Holiday* Linda is inching ever closer to the exits. Encouraged by Johnny's dynamism, enlivened by the fraternity of what Nick Potter terms their "Fifth Avenue anti-stuffed shirt and flying trapeze club" (in the playroom, on New Year's Eve, the group is established when Linda entertains Ned, Johnny, and the Potters: "a small group of very unimportant people"), and disgusted by Julia's inability to appreciate Johnny's dream, Linda creates a new woman from the gilded ashes of her high society.

## §3 ATTAINING THE SELF, BUCKING THE SYSTEM

The playroom of the Seton Estate is filled with the Seton past, preserving a naïve time when artistry trumped the demands of capital: Ned's piano on which he was writing "the Seton concerto in F minor," Linda's covered easel ("the ashes of Linda the artist"), stuffed dolls and animals, a trapeze, a Punch and Judy theater. It is also where Johnny and Linda have their first conversation (their first real recognition of one another, where they practice their tumbling routine, where they waltz as the New Year chimes, where Johnny attempts to kiss Linda before she refuses him, crestfallen. The playroom is where Linda discovers, and Johnny articulates, what Emerson calls the "unattained but attainable self."<sup>25</sup> (It is also where Linda and Johnny are isolated from the rest of society, where, in Cavell's words, "they form as it were a world elsewhere."<sup>26</sup>) Linda examines the very meaning of her life within this room; here she reads her past in such a way that a transformation becomes necessary—an inspired time of reading—and whereby she can actively author her own life.

In "History" Emerson speaks to this act of self-creation, of making one's history one's own: "The student is to read history actively and not passively; *to esteem his own life the text*, and books the commentary."<sup>27</sup> Linda discovers her unattained self within the playroom; it is here that she finds the courage to leave Manhattan. In the penultimate scene of *Holiday* Linda transforms her newfound genius into the practical power of leaving the Seton Estate once and for all. Ned remarks, as Linda leaves her baffled sister and father behind, that she is "going to get her Johnny," and she is. Linda is going to fulfill her dream; she has found the words to author her own experience. She and Johnny choose an American dream antithetical to their society, what Emerson would applaud as an "affront and reprimand" to "the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times."<sup>28</sup> Their dreams of self-authorship, of independence, and of critically examining their experience are all gestures of Emersonian perfectionism, the ethical comportment at the heart of all remarriage comedies. William Rothman explains, in a comment on Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story*, that this perfectionism is "the idea that nobody is perfect, combined with the idea that human identity is not fixed."<sup>29</sup> Emerson's idea is that we perfect ourselves by becoming what we are, by affirming our freedom and allowing for the radical change that self-discovery entails. The catch is, of course, that the system of our society might not recognize our pursuit, and this is exactly what happens in *Holiday*. As Rothman notes, "in remarriage comedies, American society as it stands lacks the moral authority to legitimize the couple's union. Hepburn and Grant [in *The Philadelphia Story*] are committed—as all remarriage comedies are, as the films wish everyone to be—to perfecting themselves and their world."<sup>30</sup>

Johnny and Linda pursue self-perfection and implore the audience to do the same, even at the risk of societal ostracization. The film *Holiday*, however, is also a broader commentary on American identity itself, on our economic circumstances and our secular religion.<sup>31</sup> *Holiday* is an artistic object of an all-too-familiar America that allows its audience to reflect on questions of wealth, identity, and recognition; it is a film that takes these questions seriously and whose answers represent competing inheritances of the American intellectual tradition. In its diegetic struggle for the meaning of America, *Holiday* presents a dialectic: Johnny/Linda and Julia/Father. Johnny and Linda represent a Romantic America, the America of self-discovery, of transcendentalism, of declaring independence and living out your ideals. Julia and Father represent the America of the market, the America of untitled aristocracy and the stagnation of a settled self. (We may even think of the film in a pragmatist vein if we recall Cornell West's formulation of pragmatism as "a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a

particular historical moment.”<sup>32</sup>)The themes and characters of *Holiday* signify America at a historical moment, much like our present moment, in which the economy has faltered and whereby people are forced to question the life projects by which their existences are defined. *Holiday* favors the Emerson-inspired American inheritance as it casts Johnny Case as the anti-stuffed shirt, the common man who values self-reliance and ideas over the allure of affluence and status (JOHNNY: “I’m a plain man of the people; I began life with these two bare hands”). *Holiday* is writing “the character of the wise man”<sup>33</sup> and revealing to America its unattained self through the lenses of Johnny and Linda.

Situated squarely in an Emersonian vein, the film embraces the common and sits “at the feet of the familiar, the low”<sup>34</sup> through Johnny, through his history and his future. Johnny’s history is anathema to Seton society: his parents owned a grocery store in Baltimore, Maryland, and he worked in a steel mill to put himself through Harvard. (While Ned and Linda prepare Johnny to meet Father, Johnny even declares that he owns “a few shares of common stock” to which Linda replies sardonically and in Father’s voice: “Common! Don’t say the word! I’m afraid he won’t do Julia. He’s a comely boy but I’m afraid just another one of the vast army of clock-watchers.”) His future is equally antithetical: Johnny characterizes himself to Julia as “not as anxious for the things most people work for – I don’t want too much money,” a stance that underscores the conflict of the film. Both Johnny and Linda seem to have already acknowledged Emerson’s statement that “the reliance on Property...is the want of self-reliance”<sup>35</sup> and separated their pursuits of happiness from the pursuit of wealth. The future they envision for themselves is the future *Holiday* envisions for America, a vision at once unattained and yet attainable, a vision that desires more for America than capital gains and class ascension, a vision where every person will be judged not by “what they have but what they are.”<sup>36</sup> Through “showing us our fantasies” *Holiday* expresses “the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself.”<sup>37</sup> It unsettles our ideas and envisions a greater American possibility.

If an appreciation for the common is the first way that *Holiday* writes its character of the wise man, the passion for experience is the second. For Emerson, the human experience is a series of constant revisions, a perpetual conversation between the self and the world. The dialectic *Holiday* sets up between Johnny/Linda and Julia/Father can be further understood as a conflict between stagnation and progression. Julia and Father symbolize the establishment, an entrenchment of ideas that have become petrified and stultifying. They represent the world that hates “that the soul *becomes*”<sup>38</sup> and that refuses to understand Emerson’s maxim that “there is no virtue which is final; are all initial.”<sup>39</sup> They are not critics of themselves or the status quo; they are merely content with the life they lead (Ned quips to Linda that Julia is not only “dull” but that “the life she envisions for herself is the life she deserves”). In short, they are settled; their questions about life and their place within the scheme of that life are settled.

Conversely, Johnny (and Linda, spurred by Johnny) represents Emerson’s “endless seeker,” he who “unsettles all things” and who is inevitably misunderstood.<sup>40</sup> With his desire to experience the “new and exciting ideas running around out there,” irreverence for material wealth (in Linda’s words Johnny has yet to be caught by “the reverence for riches”), a self-reliant spirit, and an embrace of the common, Johnny Case is a thorough Emersonian. Johnny and Linda’s America is free from the idolatry of riches, and thus their dream constitutes a threat to the Seton establishment. Father calls Johnny’s desire to quit working “un-American;” he cannot acknowledge the value of such an endeavor because it runs contrary to his definitional conception of America. Johnny’s holiday is an inherited statement of American meaning, an attunement open to the manifold meanings that present themselves in experience. As such, Johnny’s greatness is misunderstood, and his ideas are

treated skeptically by Julia and Father. As Emerson tells us in “Circles,” “the new statement is always hated by the old, and, to those dwelling in the old, comes like an abyss of skepticism.”<sup>41</sup>

In *Holiday*'s penultimate scene Johnny is almost convinced to proceed with his marriage to Julia. However, when Father instantly begins planning their honeymoon as a business trip designed to introduce Johnny to the European upper-crust, Johnny immediately reneges. He says they must make a clean break because if they begin their life loaded down with obligations they will never dig themselves out from under them. He tells Julia, self-reliantly, that “we have to make our own life, there is no other way to live it.” For Johnny, the wealth and prestige of the Seton's are stand-ins for a settled life, someone else's life, a life closed to the possibilities of experience. I imagine Emerson's words pulsating within Johnny's head: “People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”<sup>42</sup>

In a sprawling essay on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, entitled “The Avoidance of Love,” Cavell argues for the ways in which love and knowledge require acknowledgment: that is, they demand recognition from their respective objects in order to raise them to the dignity of their notion (as Hegel might say). This claim makes for a fitting conclusion to our current undertaking. Linda and Johnny are denied recognition by their society and by the individuals who claim to love them. By recognizing themselves as the authors of their own experience Johnny and Linda are able to recognize the love they share for each other. Through this recognition of the spiritual struggle underlying the American pursuit of wealth, *Holiday* offers its audience an alternate conception of national identity and creates a space in which to acknowledge this alternative. As part of a genre or simply as a classical Hollywood object, *Holiday* inherits and projects a critical American disposition that is timeless in its potential to provoke thought and inspire action.

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<sup>1</sup> All uncited quotations correspond to the dialogue of George Cukor's *Holiday*; including the title of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> In his essay on *Stella Dallas* Cavell formulates the parameters for inclusion within a genre—parameters which work perfectly for our current consideration of *Holiday*: “It is internal to the idea of a genre that I am working with that a subject deemed significant for one member must be found significant—or its absence compensated for—in each of the others” (Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 198; emphasis added.)

<sup>6</sup> As a point of clarification, “Father” is used throughout this paper to refer to the patriarch of the Seton family.

<sup>7</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Bringing Up Baby* might be an exception to this claim, though the pursuit of money in that film is undertaken for institutional reasons, not personal ones. Wealth is an issue in Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* but only peripherally—it defines the setting of the film but is not its primary tension.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1993), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> While an enormous New Year's party occurs downstairs, Linda confines herself to the playroom. She will tell the Potters, when they mistakenly enter the room in order to escape the "first class funeral" of a party, that "I live *here*, in a manner of speaking." And later, indignant at her father and sister for their treatment of Johnny, she exclaims, "This room is my home, it's the only home I've got; I understand it and it understands me." (The picture at the top of this paper is of Johnny and Linda performing an acrobatic routine in the playroom while the New Year's party takes place downstairs.)

<sup>13</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 7. In speaking of how a "spiritual American," by way of Emerson, might check their experience in this way, Cavell writes: "The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust...without this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it[,]...one is without authority in one's own experience" (Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 132; emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that a common criticism of Philip Barry's play *Holiday* is that Johnny's character does not have a robust enough sense of what exactly his holiday entails. This line of criticism portrays Johnny's holiday as little more than an extended vacation, whereas I want to claim that his holiday encompasses the philosophical tropes of self-discovery and acknowledgement.

<sup>16</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 68.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>19</sup> Gavin Lambert might not agree with the artistic connection that I am drawing. Yet, in his biographical sketch of Cukor, Lambert mentions Cukor's friendship with Maugham; "Somerset Maugham once remarked that 'to write good prose is an affair of good manners.' Cukor felt the same way about making good cinema. At certain points these two artists and friends coincided. Each was prolific, shrewd, lucid, and supremely professional. Beyond this, they parted. Maugham seemed to write out of some concealed, unresolved affliction. Cukor, who came to terms with whatever personal sacrifices he had to make, lived and created with open pleasure" (Gavin Lambert, "On Cukor," <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/george-cukor/on-cukor/564/>; accessed December 8, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Maugham, *Razor's Edge*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Russell Goodman (London: Routledge, 1995), 30.

<sup>22</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12. William Rothman understands the "classical" Hollywood inheritance as "committed to an Emersonian philosophical project that affirms the reality of human freedom, affirms the possibility, and the necessity, of radical change. Cavell, too, is committed to this project..." (William Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics*, Second Edition; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 271).

<sup>23</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>25</sup> Emerson, "History," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> Emerson, "History," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 3; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> William Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera*, 204.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Twain was fond of stating that in America money is our god, how to get it our religion.

<sup>32</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, "History," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Emerson: Essays & Poems* (New York: Library of America College Editions, 1996), 69.

<sup>35</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Emerson, "Friendship," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Emerson, "Circles," in *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 32.

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