

The Notebook: A Media Criticism

The Notebook is a romantic drama film released in June of 2004. The film is an adaptation of the book “The Notebook,” which was released in 1996 by author Nicolas Sparks. The director of the film is Nick Cassavetes, and the total runtime is 2 hours and one minute. For this paper, I will be focusing on the film.

The target audience of this film is adults who enjoy romantic dramas, specifically middle-aged women. The audience is also made for people who enjoy classic love stories, as it follows a traditional story line. The film came out in the early 2000s, but it is based in the 1940s, which allows it to have an older feel. The film portrays traditional gender roles, and due to it being based in the forties, has older styles of expectations and modes of communication.

My thesis for this paper is that the majority of messages in this film about intimate relationships are positive. There are a few exceptions, but overall the message gives the audience positive expectations about love, relationships and commitment. The messages I will be focusing on are those pertaining to building intimacy, relationship maintenance, and relationship dissolution.

The plot summary for this movie begins in a nursing home where Allie, a patient at the home, is staring out the window. An elderly man named Duke (Noah Calhoun), comes to read to her as he is also a patient at the home. His story begins at a carnival in Seabrook Island, South Carolina. Poor lumber mill worker Noah Calhoun is at the carnival with his friend when he spots Allie Hamilton. He asks her to dance, and when she says no, he hangs from a Ferris wheel right in front of her, coercing her into agreeing to a date or else he will fall off the Ferris wheel. Allie finally agrees, and Noah gets back on the wheel safely. Later, Noah sees Allie walking down the street and approaches her to ask about their date, she blows him off and drives away. Noah uses

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his friend Fin and his girlfriend who is friends with Allie to lure her into a movie night. After the movie, Noah walks Allie home and they get to know each other. Noah learns Allie is under tight schedule instructions from her parents, including tutors and piano lessons. The two of them lay in the road to chat, and share a dance in the street. This is where the romance begins, and they become inseparable. They fall in love, despite never agreeing on anything. They have fun together, and despite their differences, they are crazy about one another.

Allie meets Noah's dad, Frank Calhoun, at their small, humble home. Frank is immediately warm to her, and she gives him one of her paintings. He is extremely inviting to her and makes her a meal for the three to share. However, Allie's parents meet Noah and are very disapproving. They ask Noah how much he makes at a dinner party, and when he admits to making 40 cents an hour, they scoff. They believe their different backgrounds and circumstances make them a bad fit. Noah also learns at that dinner that Allie will be attending college in New York come fall.

Noah takes Allie to an abandoned house on the Windsor Plantation that he wants to buy one day. Allie gives Noah some details she wants incorporated into the house someday. Her wishes include a big White House, with blue shutters, a room overlooking the river where she can paint and a big wrap-around porch. They try to make love, but Allie is too nervous, and Noah is patient and respecting her wishes. They are interrupted by Noah's friend Fin bursting in, and telling them that Allie's dad sent the cops looking for her. When Allie and Noah return to her parents mansion, her parents take her into a separate room where her mom says Noah is "trash," and that she's going to wind up pregnant or heartbroken. They ban her from seeing Noah, and Allie retaliates by saying they don't know anything about love. Noah decides to walk out and Allie chases him. They have an argument where she impulsively dumps him, but is met with

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instant regret and apologies. Noah drives home. In the present narrative, Duke is continuing to tell the story to Allie.

The next morning, Allie's mother says they're going home. Allie tries to find Noah at the lumber yard but he's off on a job. Allie tells Fin to let Noah know she loves him, for him to write to her, and that things are not over between them. Noah returns and Fin shares the message, he rushes to Allie's mansion only to find the gate closed. Noah writes Allie every day for a year, with all 365 letters unanswered because Allie's mom intercepted them. He moves on, and enlists in the military with Fin to fight in World War 2. Fin is killed in battle. Allie volunteers in a hospital for wounded soldiers where she comes across Lon Hammond Jr. When Lon is well, he finds Allie at school and asks her out. He is a lawyer with old southern money, who gains her parents approval and ultimately becomes engaged to Allie. But, the moment Lon proposes, Allie thinks of Noah.

When Noah returns from the war, his father has sold their house so he can get the Windsor Plantation. When in Charleston to get building plans approved, Noah witnesses Allie and Lon kissing in a restaurant. Noah's dad passes and he is left with the house. He is convinced if he rebuilds the house, Allie will come back. Once he completes the house, he thinks of selling it but denies every offer. He begins sleeping with Martha Shaw, a widow from the war, to fight loneliness. Martha tells him she knows when he looks at her, he is thinking of another woman.

Later, Allie is trying on wedding dresses, and sees Noah's house in the paper, built to her exact details, and she faints. She tells Lon she's going on a little trip before the wedding to take care of a few things. She returns to Seabrook to find Noah in the house. She breaks the news about Lon, Noah is upset, but says they can be friends. Allie stays for dinner and a few drinks, and realizes they're in the room where they tried to make love many years ago. He reads her

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poetry on the porch, and they talk about their summer love. Allie leaves for the night, but comes back in the morning. In present time, Duke and Allie visit with Duke's kids, who we find out are both of theirs, but Allie's Dementia makes her forget them. The kids beg him to come home, but he refuses to leave her.

Noah takes Allie for a canoe ride, and they have a deep conversation. It starts to rain on their way back, and they laugh together. When they dock, Allie yells at Noah for not writing to her. He tells her he wrote every day for a year, and they both say it wasn't over for them. They make out in the rain, then make love in the house. Allie spends two nights at Noah's, and wakes up to a room set up for her to paint overlooking the river. It's then that her mother appears on Noah's doorstep and tells Allie that Lon has followed her to Seabrook. She takes Allie for a drive and reveals that she once loved a lowerclass man in the area and often wonders how her life would be different. Her mom gives her the 365 letters and admits she took them. Allie goes back to Noah's and they argue because he wants her to do what she really wants for once. Allie drives back to the hotel confused and distraught, and reads a letter on the way. In the present narrative, Duke sets up a romantic dinner for him and Allie, overlooking the water. He continues the story.

Allie is met by Lon at the hotel, and Allie confesses to being with Noah. Lon says all he wants is her and that he loves her, and Allie says she feels like a different person with Noah.

Allie returns to Noah.

In the present narrative, this part of the story makes Allie remember everything and her and Duke embrace. We find out that Duke is a pseudonym for Noah that he uses not to startle her in her disoriented state. We also learn that what he is reading to her is a journal she made, detailing their love and life together. She made it for him to read to her, and he has almost everyday since her diagnosis. Allie asks how long they have until she forgets again, and Duke

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says five minutes. They dance to their song, but Allie's dementia relapses. She panics that a stranger is touching her, and gets sedated. Noah has a heart attack and is in the hospital, the same hospital where Allie is in the dementia ward. In the Night, Noah visits Allie and she remembers him. They lay together, and pass away in their sleep, in each other's arms.

Romantic relationships at their beginning may vary in how they come about. However, theories suggest they develop in certain stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding (Kretz, 2025). Men tend to be more active and direct in the beginning stages of relationship development (Clark et al., 1999). This same trend is very apparent in the film *The Notebook*. Noah approached Allie, asked her on a date, and pursued her hard. On the other hand, women used passive and indirect strategies (Clark et al., 1999). This was demonstrated by Allie deciding to walk home with Noah to spend a little more time together after their movie date. In my opinion, this is a good relationship message, as long as the man takes no for an answer. Although it is the more traditional gender role expectations, I think there is no problem with the man initiating interest. When it comes to social penetration theory, Kretz (2025) says that experimenting and intensifying can be understood through this theory. Social penetration suggests that self-disclosure leads to intimacy, and that when first meeting, individuals share surface-level information. This is true for Noah and Allie as well. After their date where they dance and share information about themselves, they become inseparable. The couple intensifies through acts of love like meeting parents, quality time and dates. Sprecher et al. (2015) says that the intensification stage also includes sexual activity. As Noah and Allie intensify, they share many kisses and intimate, sexual moments. Also this is modeled in their time together at the Windsor Plantation, when they attempt to make love. In my opinion, the message of Noah and Allie's relationship intensification is positive. They do have a few

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arguments, but they do not leave. Instead they work it out. This concept of them being very disagreeable was also interesting when I compared it to research. According to Visser & Bedard (2025), one of the most important traits in a partner was agreeableness. But, obviously this did not matter to our main characters. It may also be positive for people in the younger generations to see because of the popularity of “hookup culture.” It wasn’t until Noah and Allie were in love with each other emotionally, that they intensified physically. Now is when we come to the first turning point of their relationship. According to Kretz (2025), a turning point is “any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship.” This occurs when Allie’s parents make her move home early. This turning point is negative for their relationship, and rips them apart to be across the country in a time where there were no phones.

Now I will talk about relationship maintenance in this film. Maintenance behaviors play an important role in sustaining relational states, especially in committed relationships (Anderegg et al., 2014). For relationship maintenance, my findings on this were not congruent with the film. In the film, Noah tries to maintain the relationship by sending Allie a letter a day, for 365 days. We find out that Allie did not receive the letters, but she also never wrote Noah. So, in this story, the man is the one attempting relationship maintaining behaviors. However, Ogan, S. & Öz Soysal, F. S. (2023) say that females are more likely to attempt relationship maintenance measures. Noah also performs relationship maintenance measures by building Allie her dream house in hope that some day she will return and he will win her back.

While Noah is performing relationship maintaining measures, Allie has moved more into relationship dissolution. Although dissolution begins to occur when Allie has to leave for school (proximity issue), for Noah it's never really over. The only act of relationship dissolution he performs is sending a final farewell letter. But, if Allie would've been receiving these letters, the

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relationship most likely wouldn't have ended. When Allie engages Lon Hammond, that is presumably the termination of her and Noah's relationship. But as we know, she has not stopped thinking of Noah.

This is where this story gets back into the building intimacy portion. Allie comes back to visit Noah, and they rebuild their relationship quicker than last time, but essentially through the same steps of initiation, experimenting, and intensifying. They also become fully sexually intimate with one another, which is where we come to a negative message. Many online critiques say that this film normalized cheating. Obviously the infidelity of this film would be a negative message to consumers.

Finally, the film ends with the ultimate relationship maintenance. We realize that Duke, the old man reading to Allie, is actually Noah. For this relationship maintenance, Duke stays with Allie at the nursing home and keeps his promise to read their love story to her everyday. To me, that message of relationship maintenance is the most positive message in this film. This message shows that love perseveres, and that is a concept that is getting less and less popular now that divorce has become so normalized.

Overall, this film has been massively popular since its release, and is known as one of the most popular romance movies, sometimes referred to as a "chick flick." I thought it was important to look into the messages of this film because emerging adulthood is critical for the development of intimacy and because romantic relationship narratives are so persuasive in the media (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). I also wanted to evaluate this film because of its traditional views on gender roles, and how the film sometimes has a romanticized view of unhealthy traits such as infidelity, or constant arguing. Class expectations are also a major role player in this film, and are the main reason that Noah and Allie got split up in the first place. The last reason I had for

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evaluating was the rich material on aging and illness. Casado-Gaul & Oró-Piqueras (2023), talk about how in Hollywood, they prefer women to “silver,” not “grey.” But, seeing Allie become dementia ridden gives the viewers a more realistic idea of what growing old looks like. Overall, the messages of perseverance, love, dedication, not letting stereotypes affect true love, and making your own choices are all positive messages in this film. All of these messages have become fairly scarce in the dating culture of my generation, and i would recommend all people my age to watch it and think about the messages pertaining to intimate relationships.

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