



Film Synopsis

The movie is about a young white American woman (Joanna) and a man with whom she's had a whirlwind romance, an African American doctor (John) she met while on a holiday in Hawaii. As the movie opens, they're at the San Francisco Airport preparing to tell her parents their plans: to marry and live in Switzerland.

The plot is centered on Joanna's return with her new fiancé to her liberal upper class home overlooking the San Francisco Bay. It is the story of how the people around them, including their parents, friends and others, react to the news of a possible marriage between a black man and a white woman. Joanna had been convinced that her parents would have no problem with the situation, because they had always raised her to believe that blacks and whites were equal, and that that any kind of racial intolerance was unacceptable. However, when Joanna's mother (Katherine Hepburn) learns of the marriage plans, she is at first more shocked than happy, and when her father finds out, he finds himself unable to support what his daughter was about to do. John's parents (the Prentices) also struggle to accept their own prejudices and fears, but it is Joanna's father (Spencer Tracy) that is having the most trouble accepting his own liberal philosophy when it is applied so dramatically to his own life.

Some brief words on the legal and social situation concerning biracial couples in 1960's America: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* came out in 1967, which was also the year that the United States Supreme Court ruled in a case called *Loving v. Virginia* that all laws which banned interracial marriages violated the United States Constitution. In fact, until that year, over 15 states still had statutes which prohibited a black and white person from getting married. The *Loving* case reflected the great social changes that were occurring within the United States at the time, most specifically because of the long and often violently opposed Civil Rights Movement. And as this film showed, even among socially liberal people who lived in such cities as San Francisco, the idea of a black and white person getting married was still shocking. Indeed, in many parts of the country, it probably still is...

Discussion Questions

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Helpful tips before starting discussion questions:

- As with all discussion questions, you do not need to use all of the questions below.
- Pick and choose five or so for discussion in small groups.
- Plan at least 30 minutes for groups of six to give everyone about five minutes to share their answers.
- When facilitating, remind people they can choose to answer some or all of the questions.

1. The personal qualities that help Spencer Tracy's character (the father of Joanna) solve his conflictive heart are often a part of the lesson to be learned in the film. What are these qualities and have you seen them in your own experience, either in your own behavior or in the behavior of someone you know?
2. Depth of feeling is what makes a film worth watching. Of the many feelings expressed in the film, with which are you most familiar?
3. What was the strongest emotion you felt when watching the film?
4. Which character did you admire, hate, love or pity the most? What was it about that character that caused you to have that reaction?
5. Recalling the scene below when John speaks to his father:

John: *"You listen to me. You say you don't want to tell me how to live my life. So, what do you think you've been doing? You tell me what rights I've got or haven't got, and what I owe to you for what you've done for me. Let me tell you something. I owe you nothing! If you carried that bag a million miles, you did what you're supposed to do because you brought me into this world! And from that day you owed me everything you could ever do for me like I will owe my son if I ever have another. But you don't own me! You can't tell me when or where I'm out of line or try to get me to live my life according to your rules. You don't even know what I am, Dad, you don't know who I am. You don't know how I feel, what I think. And if I tried to explain it the rest of your life you will never understand. You are 30 years older than I am. You and your whole lousy generation believe the way it was for you is the way it's got to be. And not until your whole generation has lain down and died will the dead weight of you be off our backs! You understand, you've got to get off my back! Dad... Dad, you're my father. I'm your son. I love you. I always have and I always will. But you think of yourself as a colored man. I think of myself as a man. Now, I've got a decision to make, hm? And I've got to make it alone, and I gotta make it in a hurry."*

Question: In this scene, what was your reaction to John speaking to his father in this way and have you ever been in a similar situation to have to stand up to someone that did not agree or believe in what you were doing? If so, what was that experience like for you?

6. Recalling the scene below when Mr. Drayton speaks to everyone at the end of the film:

Matt Drayton: *“Now Mr. Prentice, clearly a most reasonable man, says he has no wish to offend me but wants to know if I’m some kind of a “nut.” And Mrs. Prentice says that like her husband I’m a burned-out old shell of a man who cannot even remember what it’s like to love a woman the way her son loves my daughter. And strange as it seems, that’s the first statement made to me all day with which I am prepared to take issue... cause I think you’re wrong, you’re as wrong as you can be. I admit that I hadn’t considered it, hadn’t even thought about it, but I know exactly how he feels about her and there is nothing, absolutely nothing that your son feels for my daughter that I didn’t feel for Christina. Old - yes. Burned -out- certainly, but I can tell you the memories are still there - clear, intact, indestructible, and they’ll be there if I live to be 110. Where John made his mistake I think was in attaching so much importance to what her mother and I might think... because in the final analysis it doesn’t matter a damn what we think. The only thing that matters is what they feel, and how much they feel, for each other. And if it’s half of what we felt - that’s everything. As for you two and the problems you’re going to have, they seem almost unimaginable, but you’ll have no problem with me, and I think when Christina and I and your mother have some time to work on him you’ll have no problem with your father, John. But you do know, I’m sure you know, what you’re up against. There’ll be 100 million people right here in this country who will be shocked and offended and appalled and the two of you will just have to ride that out, maybe every day for the rest of your lives. You could try to ignore those people, or you could feel sorry for them and for their prejudice and their bigotry and their blind hatred and stupid fears, but where necessary you’ll just have to cling tight to each other and say “screw all those people”! Anybody could make a case, a hell of a good case, against your getting married. The arguments are so obvious that nobody has to make them. But you’re two wonderful people who happened to fall in love and happened to have a pigmentation problem, and I think that now, no matter what kind of a case some bastard could make against your getting married, there would be only one thing worse, and that would be if - knowing what you two are and knowing what you two have and knowing what you two feel- you didn’t get married.”*

Question: After recalling that scene, have you ever had an experience with having an initial reaction to something that caused pain to someone else only to change your outlook later? What was that experience like?

7. The father of the bride thought of himself as a “liberal” and enlightened in matters of race relations. However, at least initially, when it came to his own family, he had a lot of difficulty dealing with the consequences of his enlightened philosophy. What is this divergence between expressed philosophy and action called? Give some other examples of it that you see today.

Discussion Questions for Younger Generations

1. Why do you think it was difficult for the parents to accept the fact that their child wanted to marry someone of a different race?
3. How would your parents react if you wanted to date or marry someone of a different race? Would it make a difference which race? Why?
4. What do you think your parents would do if you brought home a boyfriend/girlfriend of a different religion? Would it make a difference which religion? Why?
5. Some say that in several hundred years, most Americans will have blood in them from all races and will be a shade of light brown. Do you agree that this will happen? What are the benefits and/or any detriments if this occurs?
6. What are the necessary components for a lasting relationship or marriage? In light of your answer, how do you think the marriage described in this film would have lasted?
8. Think about how this film shows how, in a society such as the U.S., racial and ethnic divisions break down and a new identity arises. Rather than thinking of themselves as Irish-American or African-American, the children found in each other shared values and a similar outlook and philosophy which were more important to them than their differences of race. Think about the relationships and marriages that you know which cross racial or religious lines. What are the shared values and similarities which make those marriages work?

Adapted from TeachWithMovies.org