

# My big fat greek wedding: a narrative analysis



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America is a country of many ethnicities, colors, races, and backgrounds. Within this multicultural society, life and various situations bring these cultures together, forcing members of different groups to interact. This intercultural mix however, invites conflict as differing opinions, values, traditions and behaviors often create misunderstandings and barriers between groups and individuals. The film, My Big Fat Greek Wedding may be viewed as a text that captures and addresses this political and social dilemma.

Further, it is a movie that has been carefully constructed and produced to convey a preferred message about this dilemma to a certain audience. Through a narrative analysis, one may identify the film's key existents and events to try to interpret what this message might be; what producers are trying to say to viewers about this social issue. In terms of characters, one may interpret that the choices for this film were made to provide viewers with an insight on the norms and practices of Greek and American culture.

This may serve as a tool to eliminate confusion, and highlight how an interaction between these differing cultures could be cause for conflict. The setting choices made for My Big Fat Greek Wedding are also significant to consider when analyzing this film as a narrative text. Similarly to the character choices, these various existent choices may have been made to teach viewers necessary lessons about Greek and American culture. Further, they may also highlight how these two cultures differ from one another.

These choices then, when combined with the events and audience selections, ultimately convey the producers' overall message. In terms of

exists then, one may identify the main character as Toula Portocaulous, who serves as narrator to film. This is a fitting choice, as the movie is based on her life as a 30-year-old daughter of Greek immigrants living in American society. She provides audiences with the necessary background and plot information they may need throughout the movie. Further, her narration explains the various elements of Greek culture in the text that non-Greek viewers may find unfamiliar.

As a result, producers may have chosen to include her as a tool to eliminate any confusion that could prevent their preferred meaning from being sent and understood by viewers. Toula's father, Gus Portocaulous, is an essential character choice as he teaches viewers that the Greek culture is male-oriented. His character is stout, overly proud and controlling; he is often heard screaming to his family that he is the head of the house, and is portrayed as the family's main decision maker, source of financial stability, and income.

As a character then, he suggests to viewers that Greek men are authoritative figures who demand respect, power, and obedience from women, children and all those beneath them in the social ranks. His wife, Maria Portocalous on the other hand, teaches viewers that in Greek culture, women are viewed as inferior to men. A heavy set woman, she is often seen "doing her duties:" cooking, cleaning, raising the children, and teaching Sunday school. Her character then, reinforces the lesson that Greek culture is male-oriented as she is portrayed as more of her husband's sidekick than his life partner.

Athena, the oldest Potrocalous child may have been chosen to convey the elements of the ideal, “ perfect” Greek woman: she is smart, beautiful, and has already “ done her job” by Greek standards. Though young, she is married to a Greek man, and already has three children which highlights how in the Greek world, a woman’s greatest (and possibly only) responsibility is to find a husband and raise a family. On the contrary, Nick Portocalous is the youngest Potocalous child and his character teaches viewers about the lifestyle of a young man in Greek society.

Unlike his sisters, Nick (being male) is never encouraged or pushed to find a spouse; his father even tells him he has “ plenty of time. ” The choice to include Nick as a character is essential then as he suggests that a certain level of male favoritism may exist within Greek families. Further, his existence in the film also reinforces how male oriented the Greek heritage really is. The choices for the “ American” characters are equally significant as they cleverly capture elements of the mainstream culture that viewers should be aware of.

For example, Ian Miller is a vital choice as he is a young, vegetarian teacher who captures the All-American qualities necessary to his role in the film. He is not dominant, but easy going and which indicates producers may have wanted audiences to see American men as less authoritative, more self serving individuals in society. His parents, Rodney and Harriet Miller are also essential character choices as they capture the typical upper middle class, conservative aspects of a White family in America. Rodney’s character is a quiet, wealthy lawyer who isn’t portrayed as overly dominant or talkative in the film.

His character's existence in the movie serves as a way to demonstrate a certain level of snobbery that exists among America's social elite; the mindset that they are well off or somehow "better than others." Similarly, Harriet's character conveys the qualities of the traditional, conservative, American wife to viewers. Her role in the film is very small, but she is portrayed as polite, relaxed and well kept. She also has a job as a lawyer and is presented as more of an equal to her husband than his inferior.

Further, she isn't shown to be bound by the chains of traditional female roles (as the Greek women are shown to be). One may say these choices then, were made to eliminate confusion and highlight the differences that exist between these two cultural groups. In other words, the characters and setting choices were made to offer audiences a background on why sacrifice, flexibility and an open mind would be essential when dealing with intercultural conflicts. In terms of setting, the story takes place in modern day Chicago, Illinois in a few significant and cleverly chosen locations.

The first may be identified as the Portocalous home, which sits comfortably in a standard, middle class American neighborhood. The house however, is modeled after the Parthenon, complete with Chorinthian columns and statues of the Greek gods scattered on the front lawn. The garage has been painted an overt Greek Flag, while a real version hangs for all to see over the front door. The choice to make the house "stick out like a sore thumb" in the quiet neighborhood is clever; it suggests to viewers that Greek people have an excessive amount of cultural pride, and that they aren't shy about expressing it (even in a foreign land).

This lesson is also conveyed to viewers in another key setting location choice, the Portocalous family restaurant. Properly named “Dancing Zorbas,” the restaurant is where the family earns their living, while proudly flaunting various elements of their Greek heritage to customers. For example, the restaurant is decorated with wall to wall murals of Greek scenery, the menu features only the most genuine Greek food, and Greek instruments and music are heard playing in the background.

The inclusion of this place then, almost suggests to viewers that Greeks may be so proud of their national roots that they may be a bit stubborn; they have been unwilling to integrate into American society and therefore, might not be the easiest of cultural groups to interact with. The restaurant is also significant as a setting choice because it accentuates the collectivistic, family oriented aspects of Greek culture. It is owned, staffed and run by the immediate Portocalous family, who come together as a unified team to make a living and support the family.

Further, it is a choice location in the film for family gatherings; a place where producers are able to assemble the “Big, Fat, Greek” characters in a single location to portray the norms and practices of Greek family life. While in this liminal, restaurant space, the obscenely large family (all twenty seven first cousins, aunts, uncles, and wacky grandmother) are seen capturing the stereotypical Greek family qualities: they are loud, in each others’ business, slightly obnoxious, yet evidently, very close.

In addition, the gatherings at the restaurant indicate that they must live in close proximity to one another, which also reiterates to viewers how

important family is to the Greek people. Another significant setting choice in My Big Fat Greek Wedding is the Miller household, where the elements of the traditional, white collar American family are displayed to viewers. The home is presented as a quiet, clean, well decorated and formal location. Further, it doesn't convey a warm feeling, but instead almost insinuates that the residents each have their own, private lives; that they come together only for specific purposes (such as eating a meal).

This then, may suggest to viewers that Americans may be less family oriented than Greeks as a social group. Further it highlights how American culture tends to be individualistic, which differs greatly from the collectivistic Greek culture. After identifying the film's characterization and setting choices, one may next choose to identify the various key events that occur in My Big Fat Greek Wedding; to pinpoint the satellites and kernels that have been carefully constructed by producers to send a message.

One significant satellite (or minor event) in the film occurs when Toula meets Ian's parents for the first time. She is invited over for dinner, and Harriet says, "Toula, now that's not a name you hear every day. Does it mean anything in your language?" Toula, fluent in English, then politely responds (accent free) that her Greek name Fortula means "light of God." Though this event is minor as it doesn't propel the plot in any way, it does provide useful information about the characters.

It draws attention to the fact that Ian's parents are aware that their son is dating a girl from a different culture. Further, it suggests that the Millers may be a bit on the snobby side, possibly reluctant to accepting her as quickly as

they would if she had been an “ American” girlfriend. Another satellite occurs in the movie when Ian becomes baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church. In the Greek culture (as Toula explains) women are expected to marry Greek men and have Greek babies, so Ian (not being Greek) must be willing to make the necessary sacrifice.

This event, though also minor, suggests that Ian is a flexible and unselfish character who will do whatever it takes to break any cultural barriers that stand in the way of marrying the one he loves. A significant kernel (or major event) that occurs in the film may be Toula and Ian’s engagement dinner. This event invites conflict into the story as the very different Greek and American families are forced to interact for the first time. In this scene, the Portocalous family has decided to host a dinner in their home so they can meet their soon-to-be son in law’s family.

The very “ American” Miller family (consisting only of Ian and his parents) expecting a quiet dinner, arrive shocked at the sight of the “ Big Fat Greek” family’s antics: they are roasting lamb on the front lawn, dancing to Greek music around burning tiki torches, and drinking foreign (extremely strong) liquor. Appearing to be in a state of culture shock, the Millers quietly retreat to a couch in the corner, alienating themselves from the Greeks. They seem to remain there for the evening, looking like deer caught in headlights as several family members try to involve them in the festivities of the evening.

However, the Millers remain quiet and unresponsive throughout the night. Through this dinner event, both families are able to see for the first time how different their cultures really are. The plot then thickens as the Portocalous



family expresses their pessimism about the upcoming marriage; doubting they will ever be able to see the Millers as “ family. ” Another kernel worth noting would be Toula and Ian’s wedding. This is a major event, as it not only solidifies the union of the characters in marriage, but the union between the two cultures as well.

The event takes place in a Greek Orthodox Church, where the entire ceremony is conducted in Greek chants and traditions. However, the Miller family (and other American guests) are present, though they are unable to understand what is being said or taking place. Then, at the reception, the families finally seem to get along. The Millers are seen taking shots of the Greek liquor while saying the Greek word for, “ cheers. ” Americans and Greeks alike are holding hands, dancing together in a circle. Even Gus, the ever proud Greek (and most reluctant to his daughter marrying someone of a different culture) seems pleased.

Significantly, he makes a speech in which he says, “ Our name Portocalous comes from the Greek word for apple, and Miller comes from the Greek word “ milo” which means orange- we are different but in the end we are all fruit. ” This kernel then is significant as it shifts the plot from conflict ridden to peaceful again. After identifying each of these elements, the next question one must address is “ so what? What were producers possibly be trying to say about the politics of intercultural conflict in society through these existent and event choices?

One potential interpretation may be that producers were trying to say that that living in an intercultural society will inevitably cause barriers,

misunderstandings, and conflicts to arise between different groups. As a result, for us to successfully blend together and function together (to overcome and deal with this social issue): a high amount of individual flexibility, sacrifice and an open mind are necessary. With this in mind, one may say the implied author might be a member of Greek society who has experienced this social issue first hand.

The implied audience then, may be viewers who could find themselves in a conflict situations due to intercultural interaction, such as the struggling interracial couples of society. One may next choose to argue that the implied author (or the producers) did effectively send this message to their intended audience through these carefully thought out existent and event choices. Through the characters and setting, producers sneakily provided audiences with a clear, well-framed mini lesson about Greek and American culture. In doing this, they eliminated confusion and highlighted the differences that exist between these two cultural groups.

In other words, the characters and setting choices were made to offer audiences a background on why sacrifice, flexibility and an open mind would be essential when dealing with intercultural conflicts. Then, the kernels and satellites may have been chosen to express how, sacrifice and flexibility and an open mind would be beneficial to overcoming this social issue. For example, the kernel engagement party event portrays what happens when people don't take an open minded, sacrificial, flexible approach when dealing with people from a different culture.

It captures how misunderstandings and ethnocentrism arise, and how it leads to resistance and alienation between groups. Further, it demonstrates how it often seems to cause even more issues and conflicts to emerge. The Wedding scene on the other hand, is presented in a way that demonstrates what happens when members of different cultural groups do approach the situation with a flexible, open mind: They are to finally able to mix amicably; to successfully blend and come together as one family.

Overall then, My Big Fat Greek Wedding is not only a funny, highly entertaining movie, but a clever way to address the political and social issue of intercultural conflict. The film's producers, through their various, clever character, setting, event and audience choices bring this dilemma to the audience's attention. After analyzing each choice carefully, it's easy to interpret their potential preferred message: that intercultural conflict is inevitable in society and therefore, being flexibility, making sacrifices and an open mind are essential when dealing with this issue.