

Where's the Love? Jefferson in the Woods in Jefferson in Paris

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A first kiss. What is more romantic? More heartfelt? More sincere than that one moment when a budding romance finally blossoms? On the surface, Thomas Jefferson and Maria Cosway's first kiss in James Ivory's film *Jefferson in Paris* is just that – a passionate love scene. Arguably, it is one of the best love scenes in the whole film; yet, a deeper look reveals a multitude of sinister undertones. The context, music, atmosphere, dialogue, and body language all exhibit a certain uneasiness that has no place in a genuinely heartwarming romantic exchange. Dissecting the scene further uncovers unpleasant inconsistencies in Jefferson's character and questions of his motives. Considering that these troublesome concerns involve the great Thomas Jefferson, most viewers don't want to delve into them, but that does not stop the filmmakers. This seemingly innocent stroll through the woods discloses a surprising amount of depth into Jefferson's character, showing qualities that parallel his behavior throughout other portions of the movie, but that do not necessarily coincide with the traditional values associated with the Founding Father.

Forthrightness and honesty are two of those values upheld as important by society and that are assumed to be encompassed by the originators of this nation. Indeed, historical records depict Jefferson as fitting those characteristics, but during his walk with Maria, his integrity is shaken in a dramatic way. He openly breaks the promise he made with his wife on her deathbed to never be involved with another woman again. He completely dismisses it in order to court this aristocratic lady he only just met in Paris. Maria even mentions the vow, knowing the magnitude of importance his deceased wife had in his life and not wanting to feel guilty about causing Jefferson to possibly break the vow. Jefferson responds with an elegant piece of rhetoric, "You and I are alive, and the earth belongs to us, to the living." Would a man, who's seen as having strong moral values, betray his wife so willingly, only because she is no longer living? It's difficult to believe, especially when the historical record indicates that the loss of his wife pained him until his own end. The filmmakers, however, have creative freedom in presenting this scene, and they have decided to portray Jefferson as breaking away from his level-headed, stoic personality and to transform him into a disloyal womanizer. Furthermore, whilst Jefferson is breaking his vow, Maria is also breaking the bond of marriage with her husband. Taking the context of the scene into consideration, it's apparent how foreboding the events transpiring actually are, in light of its façade as an enlightening love scene.

Even the atmosphere and body language add to the grim circumstances underlying the romance. Jefferson and Maria originally start the scene within a large group, in a sunny open field, but once the others are distracted by the hot air balloon landing, Jefferson quickly leads Maria into the forest. Instantly, the face of the film takes on a darker complexion. Even the audio helps transform the mood, as it seems every breath from the actors and crinkle of clothing is sharp and amplified. Suddenly, the film shifts into a sinister style. Then, Jefferson outright grabs Maria and turns her towards him, telling her in a demanding tone that he must have her come to Monticello with him. The uneasy string music begins at this exact moment as well, enhancing the weight of what Jefferson has just said. He grabs her repeatedly during the scene; it happens every time he's about to divulge another remark about needing her, and again the music accentuates each one of those moments. The visual and aural environment, along with Jefferson's actions and dialogue, give the impression that Jefferson is desperate. He's desperate for Maria's affection. There's no question that this supposedly unemotional man is fighting an internal battle over how he should deal with the matters of his heart, but to lead this cultured woman into a dark forest to express his need for her seems out-of-character. If Jefferson is going to enter into such an affair, one would almost rather it be displayed in the open, visible to all, in order to save a shred of his integrity and honesty. Instead,

viewers get this scene in the shaded forest, which parallels Jefferson's own shady way of accomplishing his motives.

Jefferson's motives have to be examined and questioned as well. Obviously, Maria wants to enter into this relationship; if she hadn't, she wouldn't have held the kiss with her new partner. It's clear, though, that she is hesitant with it. While Jefferson is suggesting that Maria leave her husband, her home, and her current life to be with him, Maria is seen shaking her head in disagreement. Just before their kiss, her eyes look to be frantically moving, examining Jefferson's face, and it appears unnatural. She brings up the issues with such an act: the distance, his vow, and his professional aspirations. Maria is undoubtedly focused on pointing out the obstacles of such a relationship, but it's futile. She does not realize the shrewdness of Jefferson. He has a romantically poetic rebuttal for every argument she specifies, and with each piece of rhetoric, she becomes more and more enamored with the charming politician.

This elegant charm is surely not a negative quality for a Founding Father to possess, but there's always trouble surrounding its use in the film. Jefferson is witnessed utilizing it throughout the movie whenever he's caught in a precarious situation with a woman in his life – and it always works. He manipulates his women to act the way he wants – the way that is beneficial to primarily himself – without much regard to others. The filmmakers portray Jefferson as self-centered through this use of his lyrical allure. The audience doesn't want to see this characterization. This is the man who wrote "all men are created equal" after all, how can he be anything short of magnanimous? But here, instead, Jefferson is displayed as egotistical. In a grand love scene, he's seen leading an aristocratic woman into the secluded woods, breaking a momentous vow with his deceased wife, convincing her to believe his home is her proper home, and discounting every reason she has against it with crafty eloquence. It's a heavy scene that shows a politician contriving a way through love. It makes sense why the directors end the exploit with the flippancy of Jefferson's miscued jump over the random pile of logs. The scene is too emotionally cumbersome otherwise.