Upholding Patriarchal Male Domination through Male Homosociality, Triangulated Eroticism, and Castration Threats in *Your Friends and Neighbors*

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Abstract

The film *Your Friends and Neighbors* portrays a complex, interweaving web of relational interactions among a group of six characters. Using Sedgwick as a foundational starting point, I discuss how varying erotic triangles between the characters create gender inversions. But the bonds of male homosociality within the film also work to create gender inversions, as these interactions have a tendency to straddle the line between homosocial and homosexual. Both of these situations set up the threat of emasculation and ultimately the threat of symbolic castration. Actions are taken to “regain” masculinity, but I argue that it is the character who intentionally emasculates himself that is eventually seen as the most masculine and does not face either of the aforementioned threats. As a result, the film contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal male domination.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Masculinity, Homosociality, Castration Threat, Eroticism
Introduction

Neil LaBute’s 1998 film *Your Friends and Neighbors* portrays a fascinating commentary on patriarchal society in that the stories that are told in the film, in a way, make ambiguous whether patriarchy always succeeds or whether it fails. The film presents both scenarios. The introduction of various erotic triangles into the film, a concept put forth by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ultimately works to tear down the patriarchal ideal of marriage in that, in the intermixing of these relational triangles, no one remains with their spouse. However, in the moments of male homosocial bonding, patriarchy gets upheld. During the homosocial interactions among the men, the patriarchal ideal of male domination is perpetuated. To be more specific, it is male domination over a female that becomes valued. This is depicted in conversations between the three male characters in moments of homosociality, as well as seen in action by the one male character—Cary—in the film that is obedient to patriarchy, as bell hooks would phrase it. As the film progresses, we see that the reason the other two male characters—Barry and Jerry—can not be viewed as part of patriarchal society, like Cary, is that they become symbolically castrated by women, essentially not making them men and having allowed women to dominate over them. By discussing male homosocial bonding, male domination over females and its impact and representation on the emotion of love, triangulated eroticism, and the threat of symbolic castration, I argue that *Your Friends and Neighbors*, while on the surface ambiguously commentating on patriarchy, ultimately reveals that the patriarchal ideal of male domination over women is the only way to achieve what one wants.

Relational Structure and Plot in *Your Friends and Neighbors*

Before delving into the analysis of *Your Friends and Neighbors*, due to the rather complex nature of the storyline, it is important that I first lay out the general plot of the film. There are six characters within the film: Mary (Amy Brenneman), Barry (Aaron Eckhart), Jerry (Ben Stiller), Terri (Catherine Keener), Cary (Jason Patric), and Cheri (Nastassja Kinski). Among these characters, there are two married couples. The first married couple to whom we are introduced is Jerry and Terri. Our first glimpse into their relationship immediately shows trouble between them as they are arguing over the most satisfying way to have sex (Jerry wants their sex to be verbal, communicative; Terri wants it to be completely silent while they have sex). Based on the way they talk to each other and treat each other, it is often difficult to see if any real love exists between the two.

The other married couple in *Your Friends and Neighbors* is Mary and Barry. Unlike Jerry and Terri, there does seem to be a certain level of love between the two of them. However, their relationship is also not without its problems. Early in the film, we discover that Barry is unable to sexually perform with his wife. Neither Mary nor Barry fully understands why this is. They are both friends with Jerry and Terri, and, after another night of dealing with her husband’s impotence, it is after a dinner party among the four of them that Mary and Jerry begin a secret affair.
The remaining two characters are Cary and Cheri. Cary is primarily friends with Jerry and Barry, though he is mildly familiar with his friends’ spouses. He is rude, crass, and constantly talking about sex or his sexual conquests. Cheri, on the other hand, initially has no ties to this group whatsoever. However, Terri interacts with Cheri at an art gallery—where Cheri is working as an artist’s assistant—and the two of them begin an affair. Eventually Cheri is introduced to Mary, and the three women occasionally gather for lunch and talk about sex. The rather convoluted plot of the film sets up perfectly an outlet to employ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ideas of erotic triangles and male homosocial desire.

**Homosociality, Desire, and Upholding Patriarchy**

The plot structure of *Your Friends and Neighbors* is heavily structured around male homosocial bonding. Sometimes this homosocial bonding is between two of the male characters, and other times it is between all three of them. Sedgwick notes a connection between homosocial bonding and a need for desire, saying, “To draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual…,” though she makes it clear that she is not discussing genital homosexual desire as being “at the root of” male homosocial bonding. The homosocial moments in the film always depict a certain level of sexual interaction (not to be confused with sexual intercourse) between the men, engaging in the homosocial/homosexual continuum Sedgwick posits. Without fail, during times of homosocial bonding, the conversation between the male characters is always about sex, be it questions about the best sex they have ever had or stories about a previous sexual encounter. But it is mainly the former—their conversations about their best sexual experience—that begins to display the homosexual aspect of Sedgwick’s continuum.

In one particular scene of male homosocial bonding, Barry, Cary, and Jerry are wrapped in towels in a sauna, and they are talking about sex. Immediately, this scene is set up in a space of homoeroticism. They are sweating, mostly naked, and discussing intimate details about their sex lives. The conversation quickly turns to their best sexual experience, and the only one to recount a specific moment, to have an actual story, is Cary. Cary’s story begins to move this scene of homosociality along Sedgwick’s homosocial/homosexual continuum more toward the homosexual end of the spectrum as Cary admits to Barry and Jerry that his best sexual experience was with a boy named Timmy Carter during their senior year of high school. Cary ultimately says that he felt something special with Timmy and that he knows Timmy felt something special, too. What is basically presented, at least in the manner in which it is told, is Cary telling a story about what he very well could consider to be his first (and, based on what we know about Cary, only) love. This story leaves Barry and Jerry rather speechless.

However, what makes Cary’s story extremely disturbing is the way in which his sexual encounter with Timmy occurred. As he is retelling the story, it becomes quite obvious that this
was not an intimate moment between two people but rather Cary—along with two other men—
gang-raping Timmy. Cary recalls the incident where he and two fellow classmates “dragged
[Timmy] into the showers, held him down, tore off his clothes, and...each took a turn...[doing]
him up the butt.” Cary uses the word “nice” to describe how he felt in that moment and says that
sex has never been like that with a woman. Toward the end of the story, he mentions how
Timmy dropped out of school immediately after the incident and never told anyone. In Cary’s
convoluted, sociopathic mind, he has convinced himself that Timmy did not tell anyone because
he, too, felt a mutual love between the two of them, instead of the likely reality which is that
Timmy dropped out of school and did not tell anyone because he was too traumatized from the
rape to relive it in any way, shape, or form. With the telling of this story, Cary clearly sets
himself up in a realm of homosexuality within a homosocial moment. But this story also
(problematically) works to emasculate Cary as he implicitly—and in a rather troubled manner—
says he loved Timmy. His expressions of intimate emotions for another male, in this particular
moment, move him into a category of feminization. However, this self-emasculation becomes an
important aspect to note by the end of the film as it has somewhat reverse effects to ultimately
help Cary remain obedient to patriarchy.

Another example of a homosocial moment that begins to move into a moment of
homosexuality occurs between Cary and Barry. This happens when both are showering in the
locker room showers after working out together. Like the previous scene I discussed, this scene,
too, occurs in a space of homoeroticism. They are soaping up their naked, wet bodies as they
discuss Terri (the wife of Jerry, who is not in this particular moment of homosociality) as being
“unfeminine,” to use Cary’s description. At the end of the scene, Cary very purposefully (so it
seems) drops the soap in the shower. It appears as if he is going to pick it up, but instead, he
decides to tackle Barry against the shower wall—both still being naked, of course. It is ironic
(intentionally ironic, I believe), for a couple of reasons, that Cary classifies Terri as
“unfeminine.” One, his speech indicates that he is critical of her “unfeminine-ness.” Yet, by
shoving Barry against a shower wall in a state of nakedness, Cary is coding himself as
“unmasculine.” And two, his classification of Terri is based on his idea that she is a lesbian—an
idea that turns out to be founded as she has an affair, and ultimately leaves her husband to partner
with, Cheri. However, as Cary’s story from the sauna scene depicted, he had (and still has) an
unhealthy emotional connection to someone of the same sex.

The larger irony with this scene is that, speaking in terms of normative, hegemonic ideals,
while still not quite accepted, it is more acceptable for a female to have feelings of romantic love
toward another female than it is for a male to have feelings of romantic love toward another male.
The reason this makes this scene ironic is because Cary still receives what he wants due to his
obedience to patriarchy. This is one of the moments that Your Friends and Neighbors makes
ambiguous the message of patriarchy. But, like with the scene in the sauna, the difference is that
Cary is intentionally emasculating himself—especially in front of Barry—in order to perpetuate
the patriarchal notion of male dominance over women, which I will discuss in more depth in the
next section.
Returning to the scene where Cary recounts the story of his sexual encounter with (or, more accurately, rape of) Timmy: it is important to remember that, despite Cary’s act of homosexuality, he is still permitted to be seen as a patriarchal figure (read: the most/only patriarchal figure in the film) because him telling the story, in the end, serves his purpose of domination over women (which, again, will be discussed in the next section). However, there is another reason that this story of male/male rape can be seen as patriarchal. Sedgwick says, “it has apparently been impossible to imagine a form of patriarchy that was not homophobic.”\(^8\) And, regardless of the fact that Cary engaged in sexual intercourse with another man, this act can still be seen as homophobic, thus upholding patriarchy—this according to Joe Wlodarz. Wlodarz opines the lack of gay, anal sex representation in film. Specifically, he mentions the lack of this representation in a positive manner. He says, “anal sex is indeed visible in film multiplexes across the country, but the catch is, it can be presented only as an act of rape.”\(^9\) Without a doubt, the story Cary tells about his encounter with Timmy can be classified as nothing except rape. Thus, Cary’s rape of Timmy can be seen as upholding patriarchy through homophobia because the rape can be seen as an attack on homosexuality rather than an act of homosexuality. Wlodarz says

\[T\]he male rape revenge films continue to go out of their way to recuperate patriarchy and masculinity (as best as possible) through the incessant scapegoating of gay men. And although their success in the recuperation of masculinity is notably incomplete, the severity of the attack on homosexuality is in no way diminished … Therefore, while these films may indeed provide an opportunity for straight male spectators to experience the thrills of getting “fucked,” it is gay men who end up more directly violated by this system of representation.\(^10\)

Wlodarz explicitly links *Your Friends and Neighbors* as one of the male rape revenge films he discusses. We can see a perpetuation of homophobic tendencies in the film, as Wlodarz describes it. And, because of Cary’s implied homophobia through his rape of a male, it becomes even more difficult to separate him from patriarchal ideals.

**Male Domination and Love**

As I mentioned in my discussion of male homosocial bonding, Cary frequently emasculates himself, but this was ultimately to gain domination over women. And, according to hooks, male sexual domination over females is equivalent to being obedient to patriarchy.\(^11\) Here, I think it is useful to introduce Heidi Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy, as quoted in Sedgwick’s book. The definition she gives of patriarchy is, “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.”\(^12\) This definition shows a clear link to homosociality by saying solidarity among men is important, thus connecting homosociality as a crucial element of patriarchy. But it needs to be mentioned that of the three male characters in *Your Friends and Neighbors*, the only one who truly dominates women is Cary, which is one...
reason he is the only one representative of patriarchy. And the female Cary ultimately dominates the most is Mary, the wife of Cary’s good friend Barry. Cary does so by impregnating Mary.

Throughout all of the male homosocial moments in the film—even when only two of the three male characters are homosocially bonding—it is important to note that Cary is always a participant in these moments. The establishment of interdependence and solidarity among men, which is a key aspect of Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy, gives a clue as to why Cary is always a part of the homosocial bonding in the film. As the character that comes to stand in for patriarchy, Cary needs to constantly be active in solidifying his bond with the other males.

However, even in the male-male (as opposed to the male-male-male) homosocial moments, the other constant—along with Cary—is Barry. But this is not because Barry represents patriarchy. Rather, Barry’s presence in the male-male bonding of homosociality is to act as a catalyst so that Cary can fulfill the latter part of Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy—to dominate women. Throughout the film, Cary recounts numerous stories of his sexual conquests over women. However, as I previously mentioned, the woman Cary ultimately dominates the most is Mary (Barry’s wife) by impregnating her. But, to get to that point, Cary needs to prove himself as unthreatening in the eyes of Barry. This is why, regardless of the situation, both Barry and Cary are always present in moments of homosocial bonding; Cary, as the symbol of patriarchy, needs to solidify his relationship the most with Barry so that Barry has no worries whatsoever about Cary trying to sexually advance himself toward Mary. This is also why Cary intentionally emasculates himself during moments of homosociality. Each instance of emasculation (i.e., the story of Cary’s homosexual experience and the implication of his “love” for his rape victim, and Cary playfully pushing Barry against a shower wall while both of them are naked), in Barry’s eyes at least, lowers Cary’s threat level and increases a level of solidarity between them. Once Cary, the representation of patriarchy, has successfully solidified the necessary relationship with Barry, it allows him to dominate (in the form of impregnation) Barry’s wife, all, of course, unbeknownst to Barry.

We can also see Cary’s domination over females in the story of the rape that he tells. This may not be immediately apparent since his rape victim, Timmy, is male. But when hooks describes male domination over females as the male being obedient to patriarchy, she continues by saying, “And if no female is around, [men] have the right to place a weaker male in the ‘female’ position.”\(^\text{13}\) None of the information provided in the film about the rape gives any indication that Timmy is strong. We can only infer that he is weak based on Cary’s conveyance of the event, which is that Timmy was easily dragged and held down. The inference of Timmy’s weakness—or, his weakness in conjunction to the brute force of the three men, including Cary, who took part in the gang-rape—puts him in the position of female, according to hooks. Timmy is further feminized by the fact that it was not just one but three men who raped him. This, then, begins to move the story somewhat from homosexual to heterosexual by coding Timmy as a female through his weakness, and regardless, Cary gets to keep fulfilling his obedience to patriarchy.
Cary even represents domination over females who are coded as masculine. Throughout the narrative of the film, there is only one time in which Cary interacts with Terri, Jerry’s wife. Terri (whom I will discuss more in the next section) is frequently seen as masculine. She normally wears more stereotypically masculine clothing (e.g., pants suits), tends to be more stern and serious, actively emasculates her husband (something else I will discuss more in the next section), and, as I mentioned earlier, Cary even refers to her as “unfeminine.” She is arguably the most stoic, unemotional character in the film, even more so than Cary who even showed mild emotion while telling his story of Timmy. However, during the one interaction that Cary and Terri share, Cary is able to break Terri’s harsh exterior. He verbally attacks her, saying no one likes her and calling her “a useless cunt.” After he walks away, she is very clearly shaken and emotional, completely frozen, and unsure how to react. He was able to exert dominance over her by controlling her emotions in a way no one else has the ability to do. This particular instance can even be seen as Cary punishing Terri for working against the very element of patriarchy he upholds—male domination over women. In his world, female domination over men is not allowed.

Thinking back to the story of Cary’s rape, it also brings the issue of love into the conversation and love’s relation to both dominance and patriarchy. When Cary is telling Jerry and Barry about the rape (though, to make it abundantly clear, Cary never uses the word “rape” to describe what he did to Timmy), the sentimentality with which he speaks of the incident is unsettling, to say the least. By Cary saying he felt something special between him and Timmy, it begins to seem that, at one time, Cary felt a very confused, twisted, and abusive kind of love for Timmy. But I do not think that there is any debate that Cary did not feel actual love for Timmy, and that Timmy most certainly did not love Cary, despite what Cary says or thinks. This is because, as hooks very simply puts it, there can be no love (in the traditional sense of the word) when there is domination. And, as an obedient participant in patriarchy, Cary must constantly exert domination over females, or weaker males who are then coded as females. This means Cary and love remain two separate entities. As hooks puts it, men have to disconnect from feelings of love in order to realize the patriarchal ideal of masculinity. This emotional disconnect, in turn, makes men incapable of becoming nurturers, and the lack of nurturing in males reinforces patriarchy. In a different writing, hooks says, “In the patriarchal male imagination, the subject of love was relegated to the realm of the weak and replaced by narratives of power and domination.” With this we see that patriarchy does not really give men the chance to love but instead only dominate. And since Cary is the only character in Your Friends and Neighbors that can be considered wholly patriarchal, he can only dominate—or manipulate in order to dominate—females (or those coded as feminine/female) as opposed to expressing any traditional feelings of love.

While love in the traditional sense may not exist in the male imagination as far as patriarchy is concerned, hate and fear do. More specifically, hate and fear of women exists. Discussing hate and fear in the context of patriarchy, hooks says, “patriarchy in its most basic,
unmediated form promotes fear and hatred of females. A man who is unabashedly and unequivocally committed to patriarchal masculinity will both fear and hate all that the culture deems feminine and womanly. There is a particular moment in the film where Cary is the pure embodiment of this element of patriarchy. In one scene, there is an unknown woman weeping in Cary’s bathroom. He begins screaming at her in a threatening voice, saying, “You are not a nice woman... Who gets their period all of a sudden? And it’s happened all over my bedding!” His hate for the woman is abundantly clear in the tone of voice he is using in which to scream at her. He says she is not nice and is livid that she has “ruined” his bedding. Cary’s fear of the woman comes in the form of his lack of knowledge about menstruation. After it has occurred, he does not want to see or touch her; he simply wants her gone by the time he gets back from the store (where he is going to get a beer and 409). He no longer knows what to do with her, indicative of an unfounded fear based on a womanly occurrence. To deal with the situation, he falls back on patriarchal domination once again. He becomes dominant over her in the situation by chastising her (for no good reason) and by telling her what to do. So, while Cary’s hate and fear of this woman is patriarchal, as hooks would say, his reaction of dominance over her is also patriarchal.

Another moment in Your Friends and Neighbors where Cary embodies patriarchal hate and fear of a woman is conveyed while he is having lunch with Jerry and Barry. Cary tells a story of an encounter he had with a woman at work. He says that this woman questioned a decision he made, and, as a consequence, he “revenge fucked” her. This alone represents both hate and fear. The “revenge fuck” is rather explicitly a form of hate, simply by his use of the word “revenge.” He hated that she went against him and therefore had to teach her a lesson, if you will. He feared her because she was a woman questioning his authority in a professional, male setting. Being obedient to patriarchy, Cary feels that his authority and say are final, and having a woman question that is particularly threatening to his patriarchal ideal.

At one point in this conversation, Cary gets even more violent with his response to her. He mentions that after his sexual encounter with her, he told her that if she ever crossed another male in public again like she did with him, he would “fucking kill her.” His hate and fear of her becomes very palpable in this statement. It is also important that this conversation happens in a moment of homosociality. In Cary’s mind, he is defending men, to men, in a male space, against the “evil woman.” Essentially, Cary is defending patriarchy. This contributes to Cary as representative of patriarchy by advocating for the supremacy and dominance of men over women.

Erotic Triangles and Symbolic Castration

In Your Friends and Neighbors, triangulated eroticism and the threat of castration work in conjunction with one another. While the representations of both occasionally take divergent paths, ultimately, a similar conclusion can be formed from their portrayals: the only one who benefits is Cary. In this lies a great irony, though. The various erotic triangles in the film actually operate to destroy the patriarchal institution of marriage. After the complex stories
involving these erotic triangles and the intermingling relationships involved with them come to light, none of the marriages survive. Likewise, the castration threat also operates to destroy patriarchy. The reason for this is that the male characters that are being threatened by symbolic castration—Jerry and Barry—are often being done so at the hands of women. They have allowed women to have control over them; they become emasculated, or even stand in as the female in their respective relationships. Thus, female dominance over men is countering the patriarchal ideal of male domination of women that Cary perfectly represents. So, how, then, do two things that oppose patriarchy benefit someone who is completely obedient to it? Cary is able to manipulate various situations related to the erotic triangles and castration threats that ultimately contribute to his domination over females—or those coded as females—and thus continue to perpetuate his obedience to patriarchy.

Discussing erotic triangles, Sedgwick says they are most often composed of two males as rivals for a female but that these triangles are asymmetrical (countering, she notes, what Girard and Freud posit), therefore the structure of these erotic triangles can alter depending upon gender changes. This is the case with the erotic triangle involving Jerry, his wife Terri, and Cheri. Instead of two male rivals fighting for the affection of a female, this triangle presents a scenario where a male and female (Jerry and Cheri, respectively) are rivals for Terri. This particular triangle, as well as Jerry and Terri’s marriage in general, works to emasculate and symbolically castrate Jerry at the hands of his wife.

When Terri meets Cheri at an art gallery, they begin a conversation and ultimately begin a relationship with one another. This affair automatically places Jerry in an emasculated position. The creation of this erotic triangle places Jerry in the position of rival to Cheri, a female. In a patriarchal mindset, a female should be no true rival of a male. However, Cheri ultimately triumphs over Jerry for Terri’s affection. His wife has decided that a female makes a better sexual partner than him. Jerry clearly feels his masculinity being threatened. He asks his wife why she would rather be with another woman; he cannot seem to fathom the reason. In response, Terri, not understanding why Jerry does not understand, angrily says, “I wanted to be with you. Now I want to be with her.” Here, Terri explicitly links Jerry to a female. The implication is that the only reason she was ever in a relationship with Jerry to begin with was because he was already feminine. By the end of the film, what Jerry mainly wants is his wife, but he does not get her. She definitively chose to remain with Cheri. Unlike Cary, Jerry does not intentionally emasculate himself. He just gets emasculated by a female, which is why Jerry does not get to embody patriarchy.

Jerry and Terri’s marriage, in general, is castrating. Terri’s primary issue with their marriage is their sex life. She wants the sex to be silent; she wants no words to ever be spoken. Her theory is that if she wants to have sex then she wants to have sex, not a conversation. Jerry, on the other hand, wants to talk while having sex; he wants there to be communication between them during such an intimate act. Jerry, in this moment, is again coded as feminine. Talking is associated with females, and Jerry’s need to talk during sex feminizes him. He is unable to have
sex just to have sex. This is particularly castrating because Terri seeks out another sex partner (Cheri) due to Jerry’s need to talk and inability to stop doing so. She has literally cut off sex with Jerry, essentially saying that his penis is useless to her. After the fist time Terri has sex with Cheri, Terri notes that the best part of the sex was the silence. A woman is able to sexually give Jerry’s wife what he cannot give her.

Regardless of the situation in which he puts himself, Jerry is unable to escape the threat of castration. Even when he goes out and finds another sex partner in Mary (Barry’s wife), he is still symbolically castrated. During Jerry and Mary’s sexual rendezvous, he has a moment of impotency. So, two different women symbolically castrate Jerry. With one woman (Terri), he is able to sexually perform but not able to satisfy. With the other woman (Mary), he is not even able to sexually perform and therefore also unable to satisfy. Again, this representation of doubled castration is why Jerry cannot stand in as a symbol for patriarchy like Cary.

However, Terri ultimately does not get what she wants either in her relationship with Cheri. As I mentioned earlier, Cary verbally attacks Terri in a moment that can be considered a punishment toward Terri for her challenging patriarchal norms. Her presumed lack of fulfillment can also be viewed as a punishment for challenging patriarchal norms. The last glimpse we see of Terri and Cheri, they are both in bed and Terri is lying still with a sleep mask over her eyes. Cheri is leaning toward Terri, crying, begging Terri to speak to her, to talk, to communicate. What Terri wanted most in a partner—silence—is now something she is not receiving. Cheri, too, is now not receiving what she wants—a partner who reciprocates love in a verbal manner. And it can also be argued that this is due to Cheri’s own disobedience to patriarchy, her disobedience coming in the form of her being a part of ruining a marriage, a patriarchal institution.

Mary, because of her affairs with Jerry and Cary, places Barry within two erotic triangles. This emasculates Barry greatly because his wife feels the need to seek the pleasure of more than one man. But it is not so much his wife’s multiple affairs that emasculates him the most, as it is his symbolic castration, as it is perhaps the most explicit example in the film. Barry is never able to sexually perform with his wife. The only time he is able to perform is during moments of self-pleasure. Mary and Barry try and work on the issue of his impotency, but there is never any success. Laura Mulvey says, “Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman (evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking).” Going along with this, Barry is aware that his wife is a castrating element—or, that is at least how he sees it anyway. At one moment in the film, in an attempt to rectify the impotency issue, Barry suggests that Mary needs to see him as a huge penis and that Mary needs to represent herself as a huge vagina to him. The way he phrases it, it is Mary who needs to do both actions. He is placing the guilt for his impotency on his wife. However, this does not work and she seeks pleasure elsewhere.

By the end of Your Friends and Neighbors, like Jerry, Terri, and Cheri, neither Mary nor Barry receives what they want. Mary first has an affair with Jerry, but he, like Barry, is unable to
sexually perform with her. She then moves on to Cary. While he is able to sexually perform
with her, she does not receive the emotional relationship she truly wants. (She frequently says
“hold me” to the men she is with.) Barry becomes completely unable to sexually perform, even
while masturbating. By not following the rules of patriarchy (Mary for castrating a male and
Barry for being castrated by a woman), their pleasure is denied.

A homosocial triangle between Cary, Barry, and Jerry is even visually represented at one
moment in the film. This can be seen as somewhat of a foreshadow. Visually, at the top of this
triangle is Cary. We can take this to mean that Cary is the dominant male; he is the one who will
ultimately get what he wants. This visual triangle also works to emasculate Jerry and Barry.
They both are on the bottom in conjunction to Cary. They are positioned as the weaker males to
Cary’s dominating male. As the weaker males, they are coded as feminine. Also, it is symbolic
of Cary’s domination of Jerry and Barry’s spouses. Cary is dominant over Terri (Jerry’s wife) in
the book store when he verbally attacks her. And Cary is dominant over Mary (Barry’s wife)
when he impregnates her. His dominance over their spouses is something they could not do, and
therefore, by extension, he is also dominant over them.

Conclusion

*Your Friends and Neighbors* creates a narrative of patriarchy that shows how difficult it is
to achieve what you ultimately want if you do not subscribe to patriarchal ideals. The film also
creates a hierarchy within patriarchy, showing that the way to get what you want is most easily
achieved through male domination over women. Of the six characters, five are not active
participants in patriarchy in one way or another and thus do not receive what they want. Jerry
does not end up with his wife. Terri does not end up with a silent sex partner. Cheri does not end
up with someone who openly reciprocates her love. Barry is never able to sexually satisfy a
woman, and, ultimately, is not even able to satisfy himself. Mary, while being able to find a
sexually potent partner, does not end up with a partner who emotionally comforts her. Only
one—Cary—is the embodiment of patriarchy, and his obedience to patriarchy is rewarded. He is
able to sexually conquer the one female who previously could not be. And, in the ultimate act of
male domination, he impregnates her, thus continuing his legacy of patriarchy. All of this also
acts as a reinforcement of power differentials between genders. Of the six, the one who gets what
he wants is the “true” male. None of the three females are rewarded and neither are Jerry and
Barry who are made to stand in for females by other females. Even though the employment of
triangulated eroticism and castration threats work to fight against patriarchy, the person who is
not symbolically castrated by others and the person who gets what they want from the
intermingling of these erotic triangles, just so happens to be the person who is obedient to
patriarchy. So, in the end, patriarchy cannot be truly defeated either way and therefore gets
upheld and reinforced.
Endnotes

3 Throughout *Your Friends and Neighbors*, none of the characters are ever referred to by their name—neither first nor last name. They are only referred to by gendered pronouns. It is not until the end credits that we actually see the names of the characters. However, for the duration of this essay I will refer to the characters by their names in an attempt to make more simplistic the following descriptions and analyses.
5 Ibid, 2.
6 This is the only moment in the entire film where someone is explicitly referred to by name, and it is a character that is never seen on screen. The implications of name use for Timmy but a lack of name use for the other characters (as well as the employment of rhyming names for the six characters) throughout the film is worthy of exploration. However, for purposes of this essay, it is somewhat digressive and therefore will not be discussed at any length.
7 At this moment in my essay, I feel the need to make explicit as possible the way in which I am using the word “homosexual” to describe moments of homosociality. Sedgwick, in *Between Men*, notes that there is a “diacritical opposition between the ‘homosocial’ and the ‘homosexual’” (2). I am not implying homosexual in the sense that the male characters want each other in a sexually, genitally desired way. Rather, I am saying that certain moments of homosociality occur in homoerotic spaces, and that homosexual-like conduct occurs, but that this is not an indication of the male characters desiring each other sexually.
10 Ibid, 78.
14 Ibid, 123.
15 Ibid, 133.
References


