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*Before Sunrise, Before Sunset, and the Decay of Idealism*

Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* painted us an image of two characters that were different in many ways. Celine was ever the romantic but was constantly troubled by her own mortality and measured the world against her political and social ideologies. Jesse struck the figure of a romantic with a caustic, cynical aftertaste, paying little heed to the affairs of the world around him but caught up in the narcissistic net of his own struggles with love and identity. However, despite their myriad differences, Jesse and Celine both had a few things in common: youth, shortsightedness, and idealism. In the sequel film, *Before Sunset*, we see the two nine years down the road, and Linklater chooses to paint us a new image of these two individuals: that of a pair of people having had their youthful idealism turn to ash in their hands and struggling to hold onto whatever vestiges may not have been blown away by the winds of time.

Jesse's idealism is the one that is most obviously eroded over time. If we look at how he feels in *Before Sunrise* about the concept of love, it appears he adopts the stance of forced cynicism. He doesn't seem to think much of the concept, but he takes this position because his recent breakup forced him to do so as a coping mechanism. Paradoxically, his outlook on his own love life seems more cautiously optimistic. At first this seems like a contradiction at conception, but it makes sense in character because Jesse's thoughts and feelings trend toward inward focus. In *Before Sunset*, it is almost as though the roles have been reversed. In a heated moment, Jesse confesses to Celine that his marriage is in shambles. He doesn't want to divorce his wife for the sake of their child, but the marriage itself is loveless, sexless, and distant. On the other hand, he seems to be a cynic toward the concept of love desperately trying to be a romantic for the sake of his own sanity as opposed to the romantic trying to

be a cynic in *Before Sunrise*. We can hear through both the writing and actor Ethan Hawke's performance that the character simply never thought his life would turn out like this, buying into the idealistic dreams of monogamy and everlasting love, and he is confused, frightened, and saddened by the way his ideals have been laid bare before him.

Celine, by contrast, seems at first to be living her dream in *Before Sunset*. She has become a world-traveler and professional activist for the environment, following up on her global concerns expressed in *Before Sunrise*. However, as we learn more about her character, it's revealed that she is anything but content, especially in her romantic life. Celine's current relationship with a photojournalist is strained owing to his constant absence. Furthermore, it is revealed that none of Celine's relationships in the nine years between movies have been fulfilling to her. Her romantic ideal of love has been browbeaten again and again by disappointment until it withered down into a cynicism different from the one Jesse experiences but equally venomous. She becomes satisfied with the idea that love is supposed to be a certain way that is different from the classically expressed concept, and decides to live with it, which she has done up until she reads Jesse's book. She confesses in an angry, sad tirade that she had given up on classical love until she read it and her romanticism came flooding back to force her thoughts back into unpleasant dissonance with the reality around her.

We see that the two have both lost their idealism with regard to love. They have been robbed of their romanticism through time and stress and bad relationships. At the end of *Before Sunset*, we see the two of them presumably about to have a sexual encounter after confessing all of their difficulties to one another. The two of them are clinging to each other, hoping to revive the last vestiges of hope in the idea of romantic love that they had.