

Blue Valentine

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue



Marriage is a juicy topic for filmmakers, but few movies get made about happy ones. More common is the dissection of a once-happy union that is coming apart at the seams. The reasons for its demise usually involve such dramatic standbys as infidelity, illness or death, though a few directors with a more pronounced tragic vision have upped the ante by zeroing in on festering hatred (think John Cassavetes) or gut-wrenching psychological cruelty (a specialty of Ingmar Bergman).

Derek Cianfrance's *Blue Valentine* is also about the last gasps of a once-happy marriage, but there is a surprising lack of heavy dramatic conflict at its core. In the six years that Dean (Ryan Gosling) and Cindy (Michelle Williams) have been together, there hasn't been any ugly betrayal, big lie or major life change. Instead, all of the pressure is coming from within: they are six years older than when they first took their vows, and one of them has changed more than the other.

That would be Cindy, whose natural intelligence is starting to feed her latent ambition. She is a well-respected nurse at a small medical center, where she has opportunities for advancement. But her dreams of a better life with greater

challenges are being thwarted by Dean, who never graduated high school, has gone from being a furniture mover to being a house painter and seems indifferent to the ladder of success. Dean adores Cindy, is a terrific father to their daughter and possesses a sense of humor and sweetness of spirit that most women would kill for in a husband. But he also drinks too much beer in the morning. (When Cindy complains that if he didn't drink that early he could find a better job, Dean retorts that he's grateful to have a job that allows him to drink in the morning.)

Using an ambitious flashback structure, *Blue Valentine* chronicles how Dean and Cindy met and fell in love—and how, six years later, they are trying to find the common ground that will keep them together. That's difficult, since the ground keeps shifting.

Dean thinks they need to reclaim the spontaneity and sexuality of their early years, when their love for each other was more than enough to overcome barriers. Cindy no longer thinks that is sufficient, longing instead for a more stable environment in which to thrive and survive. Dean seems to be the better parent, Cindy the better spouse. All these differences and the pain they bring on come to a head during a long night in the "future room" of a ridiculous sex motel that Dean insists they go to, where they strip down both physically and emotionally to hash things out.

The film stumbles a bit in the third act, in which Cianfrance resorts to some overly melodramatic moments to carry the movie to its conclusion—scenes that feel crudely imposed on this otherwise understated story. But even these dips in the road are salvaged thanks to the masterful performances by Gosling and Williams. Dean's gentleness and unsullied love for his wife and daughter are heartbreaking, thanks in large part to Gosling's ability to convey the confusion that defines him. Williams, who is fast becoming a major American actress, proves expert at expressing Cindy's anguish as she confronts childhood pain, bad decisions and the fact that she is falling out of love with a man she still wants to love.

By the end of *Blue Valentine*, some viewers will find themselves rooting for the marriage to survive a few more rounds. Others may find themselves hoping that Dean and Cindy walk away from each other before the wounds get too deep. Your reaction may speak not only to your feeling about the characters and the film but also to your own sense of what marriage represents—and how tightly you would hold on if it started to blow away.