

## FROM HEAVEN TO HELL IN ALLEGORY OF MARRIAGE



By Carrie Rickey  
INQUIRER MOVIE CRITIC

**M**ore powerfully than any other art, movies show you illusions that drive a wedge between what you believe and what you feel. Understand that I don't believe in the afterlife, nor in heaven or hell. Yet I've always been unusually susceptible to (read: a sucker for) supernatural films supposedly made in heaven or dealing with to-hell-and-back themes. So believe me when I tell you *What Dreams May Come* takes up where *Ghost* left off. If it gallops bravely out of the celestial reaches of heaven into the subterranean depths of hell to depict the ultimate labor of love.

Eyepopping, heartbreaking, mind-bending, gut-wrenching and, finally, life-affirming, *What Dreams May Come* takes organs and emotions hostage until a cathartic finale that doesn't so much jerk tears as pump them. In recent memory, *Shadowlands* is the only other film that has launched my projectile tears.

Based on the novel by Richard Matheson, this allegory of marriage depicts what happens when adoring spouses (played by Robin Williams and Annabella Sciorra) get sent to polar places in the afterlife.

Ron Bass' screenplay focuses simply on how the husband ditches heaven to rescue his wife from the maw of

hell. But there is nothing simple about director Vincent Ward's hallucinatory visuals, which are literally jaw-dropping. Something about the way the atmospherics evoke emotional states elevated Ward's film from borderline transcendent.

Heaven is a sylvan glade as imagined by Max Parrish with an assist from Monet. Hell is a killing field from the fevered mind of Hieronymous Bosch as made even starker by Goya.

The only reason that these breathtaking optical effects – achieved by a potent cocktail of matte paintings, digital compositing, and animation – don't upstage the story is that Williams and Sciorra are exceptionally powerful, even though the film's biggest problem is that it asks us to grieve for their characters before we're properly introduced.

During the opening credits, Chris (Williams) talks about how he met his wife, Annie (Sciorra), on a lake in the Alps. The scene is so impossibly schmaltzy and improbably beautiful (crystalline sky, emerald fields, ruby eroticism) that it announces the film's double-pronged assault. If it doesn't choke you with emotion, it will choke you with atmosphere. By the end of the credits sequence, Chris and Annie have married, enjoyed their kids and endured a sudden and unimaginable loss. It was during these early sequences of

### Review: Film

#### WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

Produced by Stephen Simon and Barnet Bain, directed by Vincent Ward, written by Ron Bass, based on the novel by Richard Matheson, photography by Eduardo Serra music by Michael Kamen, distributed by Polygram Films.

**Running time:** 1:53

Chris Neilson - Robin Williams

Albert - Cuba Gooding Jr.

Annie Neilson - Annabella Sciorra

The 'Tracker' - Max von Sydow

Leona - Rosalind Chao

**Parent's guide:** PG-13 (grotesques, gore, death, mature themes)

**Showing at:** area theaters

*What Dreams May Come* that Williams' grief-stricken performance suggested a pattern.

From *The Fisher King* through *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Good Will Hunting*, the actor has vividly dramatized various ways of working through loss. In a movie that in many ways recalls Dante's *Inferno*, Williams assumes the role of Virgil, guiding us mortals through the rings of hell. Death and loss make his characters belatedly understand the gift of life.

It is more through his modulated performance than through Ward's overheated visuals that we come to understand this deeply felt film as an analysis of the marital dynamic. Chris is propelled to hell not merely out of duty or undying love, but because he realizes that in the marriage, he let his wife do all the emotional work while he did all the administrative work. This burden of guilt intrudes on his enjoyment of the Elysian Fields. For him, how can heaven be a place Annie is not?

Ward's film aggressively plays with the difference between comforting illusions and harsh realities. And while I didn't buy the illusions – cumulatively, the film begins to resemble a simple little cookie impastoed with tons of icing – I found the hero's journey to emotional recognition spectrally moving.