

Investigating the American Dream in *Pretty Woman* (1990)

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The United States has the largest gap between rich and poor individuals living in the top industrialized nations of the world, a gulf that widened significantly during the 1990s (Miringoff and Miringoff 104), and the gap has worsened since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (Mishel, Bernstein and Allegretto 383). Despite the economic boom of the 1990s, real dollars weekly wages had been declining since the early 1970s (Miringoff and Miringoff 98) and since 2001 "the wage growth of many workers has continued to slow and is now falling behind inflation" (Mishel, Bernstein and Allegretto 19), and the U.S. has the "worst record" of child poverty of the industrialized countries (Miringoff and Miringoff 80). These steady economic losses for the last 35 years leave Americans in a situation in stark contrast to the U. S. public's cherished belief in the American Dream of success.

Most Americans have not been living the American Dream for well over a decade; yet their belief in it is unwavering. The income of the poor, the working class and the middle class has stagnated or dropped, and this situation requires many individuals to struggle to understand their own economic realities within a culture that communicates the ascendancy of the American Dream. Jackson Lears cited a study in which Americans admitted there were unfair class inequalities that lead to the inequitable economic resource distribution. However, these same people explained "their class inferiority as a sign of personal failure, even as many realized that they had been constrained by class origins that they could not control" (Lears 578). How is the American Dream supported and preserved despite the lived experiences of most Americans? This essay looks at one way in which the predominance of the American Dream is communicated via Hollywood motion pictures.

Communicating Social Values through Film

Kenneth Burke states that language is a symbolic means of gaining cooperative behavior in humans and, in this way, a society or culture forms hierarchies through power relationships. Burke suggests what he terms a 'dramatistic' method for understanding the communication of social order. From this perspective, self identification, personal politics, and the values of everyday social life are communicated through narrative dramas. Motion pictures are one form of mediated drama that conveys social messages; hence the study of filmic narratives is an important and well established area of

inquiry. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell sees film as one of the available resources that aid us in making ideas significant and concepts real in our daily lives. Furthermore, the communication of societal myths and social values has become an important focus of rhetorical studies. Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas Frenz find that "Societal values and film are related [...] By projecting collective images of a culture, by serving as symptoms of cultural needs, and by symbolizing trends, dramatic media both reflect and create societal events [...] Film is clearly a potent vehicle for symbolizing socio-political change" (64). In this way, dramatism provides one way of understanding the relationship between narrative drama and everyday social life.

The American Dream and Cross-Class Fantasies

In their top ten U.S. news stories of 1999, the 206 Associated Press newspaper and broadcast editors rated the booming U.S. economy sixth ("List of Top 10" para. 1). This ranking is justified by the enormous amount of coverage that the news media generated concerning the economic well-being of the U.S. in the 1990s. Since the 1990s were considered economic boom years in which all Americans supposedly benefited from the growing economy, they are a fertile place to investigate the American Dream.

What is the American Dream? Walter Fisher argues that the American Dream is actually two myths: "The materialistic myth of success and the moralistic myth of brotherhood. Fisher explains that the egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood [...] [involves] the values of tolerance, charity, compassion and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual" (Fisher 161). In this way, the American Dream is both economic well being (owning a home and enjoying economic prosperity for example), and it is also about valuing and caring for others regardless of their social status.

This essay focuses on *Pretty Woman* (1990), one of the most popular films of the 1990s. *Pretty Woman* is an especially appropriate film for investigating the American Dream because it concentrates on the social class differences between its two protagonists, Edward (Richard Gere) the ultra rich corporate raider, and Vivian (Julia Roberts) the poor street prostitute. Steven J. Ross calls this type of movie a cross-class fantasy because of it involves characters from different social classes involved in a love story (Ross 34).

This current analysis finds that in *Pretty Woman*, the upper-class Edward and the lower-class Vivian meet and fall in love. The result is that both their lives are changed for the better. Edward finds love, gives up his unethical business practices and his immoral personal life, overcomes his dark depression, and discovers his true identity and his path to happiness (something that previously escaped him). Vivian, likewise, finds true love and is rescued from her difficult life in which she yearns to be saved by her 'knight in

shining armor'. Their mutual rescue reaffirms the importance of the American Dream's moralistic myth of brotherhood and fair play while their cross-class romance offers an idyllic view of the American Dream. In other words, the cross-class romances unite the materialistic and moralistic myths of the American Dream by joining the upper-class and lower-class heroes in a romantic union that represents the utopian society of the American Dream. This view of the American Dream promises economic well-being and moral goodness. The protagonists symbolically heal the social class divides in American society through their union and the movie rhetorically communicates the American Dream's prepotency.

***Pretty Woman* as Cross-Class Romance**

Pretty Woman stands as an early testament to the popularity of the Hollywood cross-class fantasy film in the 1990s. Josh Chetwynd sates that *Pretty Woman* is one of the highest domestic grossing films of the 1990s (Chetwynd 7D). The relationship between the good hearted "working girl" and the ultra rich corporate raider is a popular Cinderella inspired cross-class fantasy. A way of understanding how class is communicated in films is required in order to investigate cross class relationships. Erik Wright explains that a process-based analysis of social class construction takes shape around people's lived experiences (492-493). A process-based look of social class is ideal for cinematic texts because filmic narratives and cinematic iconography demonstrate class affiliations by showing the characters as they go through their daily lives. *Pretty Woman* is replete with dichotomous signifiers of class and social status. Vivian and her roommate Kit's (Laura San Giacomo's) apartment on Hollywood Boulevard is inhabited by prostitutes, drug dealers, murderers, drug addicts, and homeless people. Edward's world is inhabited by lawyers, corporate leaders, bankers, and various beautiful people in expensive clothes. In Vivian's world, her roommate spends the rent money on drugs, her landlord 'shakes down' the tenants, and she rides the bus. In Edward's rarified space, he lives alone (or at least is lonely), he dines on expensive cuisine that he usually does not eat, he sleeps in a penthouse where he suffers from insomnia, and he works constantly in a joyless experience of life. In short, the film dramatically demonstrates that Vivian's and Edward's class status are worlds apart. In no way do Vivian's world and Edward's world intersect even though they live in the same geographic area.

When Vivian moves into Edward's realm she is transported to another social world. The film communicates to the audience that Edward's world is different because of his social status. Vivian has never seen this world before. Vivian and Edward meet only through an accident that allows Vivian access to Edward and his world. Once that happens, she and Edward are able to connect

in both physical and emotional ways. Prior to this, material structures and social hierarchies kept Vivian in her social world dreaming of a better life and kept Edward in his world, rich but miserable. When these real barriers are subverted by fate, Vivian and Edward are able to benefit from their cross-class relationship. This narrative dramatically shows that joining these two people improves both of their lives and subverts the unfair social order.

In Edward's upper-class world, Vivian attends a polo match, plays chess in a limo, attends her first opera, dines in chic restaurants, and shops on posh Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. These settings function in more ways than just providing lived experiences for Vivian. They drive the narrative forward and provide the common convention of incongruent humor by placing a working-class prostitute into unfamiliar high-class situations where she does not know the proper behavior thus the audience is provided with many amusing incidents. Illustrations of these include her whooping excitedly when a goal is scored at the polo match, and her accidental flinging of escargot from her plate at a business dinner. Further, through all of these scenes Vivian may look silly but the pretentious people that surround her seem witless and rude. These dislikeable one-dimensional snobs aid the audience in seeing Vivian as a more engaging person and allowing them to identify with her despite her profession. Even though each of these filmic elements may serve various functions they are arranged so that the audience is invited to compare and contrast the two very different worlds of Vivian and Edward and their lived experiences. Differences in the environs and experiences of these two characters provide a short-hand method of determining their respective class affiliations in terms of economic stratifications and 'high-brow' versus 'low-brow' cultures. This iconic short-hand language of class ignores the subtle differences in class affiliations that exist in the United States and works from a bipolar opposite of rich and poor, cultured and common. In a matter of just a few filmic moments the audience understands the class differences in these two people, their needs and hopes, and can begin to see the benefits that the cross-class relationship is going to offer them both.

The Benefits of Cross-Class Romance

Once these class distinctions have been made clear and the cross-class relationships established, the interaction between the characters becomes significant. Perhaps the key to the significance of Vivian and Edward's relationship can be better expressed by the way it differs from Edward's other social interactions. Edward's time with his peers is often structured by business dealings. For example, Edward is shown interacting with his lawyer Philip (Jason Alexander), who repeatedly speaks of himself, both to Edward and others, as Edward's friend. Yet Edward is a loner who treats Philip more as an

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employee. In fact, Edward treats everyone as an employee. Edward's emotional distance results from his peers' inability to break through Edward's psychological 'guard' to reach him and thus cannot help him overcome his troubled existence. In fact, they show no desire to help Edward who is obviously unhappy.

Vivian, however, can and does reach Edward because she has a special quality that is noted during the film by Edward and others. Edward remarks to Vivian early on their first night together that "very few people surprise me", but she does surprise him; Barney (Hector Elizondo), the hotel manager refers to her as an "intriguing young lady"; and James Morse (Ralph Bellamy), the president of a shipbuilding firm, tells her that he enjoys her company. Part of Vivian's special nature is her ability to treat people in ways that make them feel special without seeming phony or insincere. She seems genuinely able to accept people and like them on their own merits.

Vivian treats Edward differently than his peers. He is obviously attracted to her beauty, but he also responds to her nurturing. Her ability to make Edward feel better is shown as the film portrays Edward's cold demeanor warming during the week they spend together. Vivian reaches Edward in at least two significant ways. First, she is often brutally honest concerning his questionable business dealings by foregrounding her working-class values that promote hard work, fair play, and the individual worth of all people. In one telling scene Vivian remarks, "You don't make anything and you don't build anything. What do you do with [the companies] after you buy them?" Edward responds: "I sell them; the parts are worth more than the whole". Vivian remarks, "kind of like stealing cars and selling them for parts". This remark highlights both the viewpoint that corporate raiding is unethical and akin to stealing and that Vivian is not afraid to give Edward her honest appraisal of his business dealings. This honesty is contrasted with Philip. After Edward makes a statement about how their corporate raiding doesn't build or make anything, Phillip responds, "We make money." Stating the obvious simply in such a way as to say, the immoral ends justify the unethical means.

Second, Vivian is able to break through Edward's emotional guard and help him feel better about himself. In a touching scene, Vivian lovingly bathes Edward as he talks about his mother and father and his anger toward his dad. During this scene he admits to spending \$10,000 in professional therapy but the \$3,000 week that he spends with Vivian seems to be providing more real help for his troubled state than his expensive counseling ever produced. Edward changes from uptight and somber to happy and carefree. Philip sums the obvious concerning Edward's dramatic change by saying "I wonder if this girl isn't the difference?"

But it is the cross-class interaction between the two that is the 'difference'. Vivian's down-to-earth philosophy and working-class value system aid in her ability to interact with Edward as lover and friend. This unique relationship acts as therapy for Edward, who is first intrigued by Vivian and then won over by her enjoyment of life and nurturing ways, thereby liberating him from his lack of sleep and appetite, as well as his emotional malaise and inability to maintain healthy personal relationships. Current class ideology usually interprets cross-class fantasies to be the dream of the lower class to somehow become wealthy by promoting relationships with the rich. However, this film suggests an implicit morality whereby the member of the upper class discovers true love, genuine beauty, moral substance, and spiritual renewal from romantic bonding to this exceptional member of the lower class (whose true value, interestingly, often must be revealed by placing her in the clothing and social situations of the upper class). Thus Edward is healed by his interaction with Vivian, and becomes a caring, happy person, and an ethical business person who wants to produce rather than destroy. He quits his corporate raiding. In short, Edward is able to overcome his social dysfunction, personal unhappiness and unethical business practices because of his involvement with Vivian.

But what is the benefit to Vivian? *Pretty Woman* opens with a street prophet yelling out "What's your dream?" and ends with the same man announcing "some dreams come true, some don't. Keep on dreaming". Vivian flatly states during the course of the film that her dream is to have "the fairy tale." Vivian should not be mistaken as a foolish dreamer though. She realizes the differences between make believe and the real world. Vivian knows the difference between her fairytale dream and her reality as she tells Barney, the helpful hotel manager: "you and me live in the real world most of time." Early on the film demonstrates the reality of lower-class life as Vivian must escape harm from her angry landlord by ducking out the window when she realizes that her roommate has squandered the rent money. Vivian understands that she must make a living as a prostitute and yearns for a better life where she will escape the harsh realities of the street and find true love. She dreams of the impractical fairytale, but she does so in a somewhat practical way, that is, she dreams of meeting Mr. Right. Mr. Right is the man who will have the resources to help her escape her unfortunate life and who will love her. She wishes to be carried away from her life as a prostitute by a knight in shining armor and live happily ever after. Therefore her successful union with Edward is the fulfillment of her romantic dream and the answer to her economic difficulties.

In the end, Edward is healed and Vivian is rescued and her dream fulfilled. The social structures that kept them apart and that worked to separate them are variously disposed of, ignored, thwarted, bridged and generally subverted. The romance becomes the way of overcoming the problems that

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Edward and Vivian individually face. Their joining in true love is the way to happiness for the both of them. Edward is transformed, moralized, physically and psychologically “healed” by his interaction with Vivian. Vivian receives her dream of being carried away from her unhappy lower-class life by her true love, Edward. At this point Edward is the perfect prince charming of the traditional fairytale. He has been transformed and may now play his proper role. He rides up to Vivian’s apartment in his knight in shining armor limousine and sweeps Vivian away to live in his upper-class world. Edward the newly formulated prince charming can now save Vivian from her poor life. As the movie ends, it seems inevitable that Vivian and Edward will marry and Vivian will become upper class and enjoy the riches that membership brings, but she will maintain her moral values system. Thus the union represents the best the American Dream offers: material success and moral uprightness.

American Class/American Dream

The film’s rhetoric is revealing because it illustrates the basic dynamics of social order. It does not picture an egalitarian society, but a heavily stratified America in the 1990s where social class dictates the freedom, privilege, identity, and potential happiness of all individuals. Yet, *Pretty Woman* also illustrates the idealism that American society can be classless through the American Dream. The film communicates the idea that social order is not rigid or fixed, but is something that can be ruptured and ameliorated, therefore, the American Dream of social equality is possible. This narrative supports the basic denial of class politics embedded in American political ideology: Everyone can achieve the American Dream in the putatively ‘classless’ society. The only reason for someone not to achieve their goals is for reasons of personal failure.

This point is clearly made in *Pretty Woman*. Kit is the only one of Vivian’s friends with whom the audience is acquainted. Kit is certainly likeable enough, but early in the film she squanders their rent money on recreational drugs. This stereotype helps to reinforce the belief that many poor and economically struggling people deserve their fate. Denny Braun explains: “One common American view is that poor people deserve their lowly place ... [that] relative failure to achieve a decent income within our society is seen as somehow due to personal failure” (Braun 15). Since this view prevails among many Americans, personal failures such as the irresponsible use of the rent money to buy recreational drugs become the kind of damning media stereotype that reinforces uniformed beliefs about the poor and the working class.

Pretty Woman presents class conflicts as personal problems for its characters. Moreover and problematically, these conflicts are resolved by personal transformation of character, a transformation that embraces morality and transcends class issues as significant or determinative. In these cases, true

love resolves the class-based conflicts. The very 'real' and insurmountable structural social differences that kept Edward and Vivian apart have not magically disappeared, they have rhetorically evaporated. The social stratifications that haunted Vivian are still intact. Yet, Edward and Vivian are joined the rhetorically classless bond of the moralistic myth of the American Dream. They are socially integrated.

Letty Pogrebin states that "all other class problems seem to pale beside the ambivalence and guilt surrounding the issue of cross-class friendships" (156) which further supports the significance of films with successful cross-class relationships. "Nobody I interviewed," Pogrebin continues, "had found a way to avoid the discomfort of discrepant possessions and privileges [...]. For upper-class people, like-status friends confirm their identity and help them to further differentiate themselves from 'lesser' stock" (Pogrebin 158). This filmic narrative is troubling because its version of the cross-class relationship is idyllic, but the reality of cross-class relationships is far from this cinematic version. In *Pretty Woman* the individuals remain in the cross-class relationships and find a sense of place, a feeling of belonging, a fulfillment of desire, spiritual healing, and moral uprightness. The fictional relationships are the narrative equivalent of the harmony of the moralistic myth of the American Dream. In reality Pogrebin states the problem succinctly: "The myth of a classless society continues to animate Americans' collective self-image, maybe because an acceptance of class would imply an acceptance of the economic inequalities that cause it [and] ... class [is] taboo [in America]" (Pogrebin 150). In these motion pictures, an America divided by class is rhetorically joined through a reassuring, calming and healing view of the United States. These movies show that the structural inequalities can be undone on the individual level.

Perhaps even more persuasive is the view of the world outside cross-class relationships in this film. There the immoral upper class forms relationships that are materially rich but morally bankrupt. They live sorry lives of meaningless excess and enjoy no real love or caring. The poorer characters that do not enter into the harmonious cross-class relationships are often represented as the bungled and botched of society, the homeless, drug addicted, and colorful Hollywood stereotypes of their real life counterparts, but even when they are presented as humorous their lifestyles are not desirable. Only the cross-class union finds moral, emotional, and economic happiness.

The American Dream Realized

The popularity and success of cross-class fantasy films suggest that they adhere to the American Dream, a myth that many Americans cherish and that aids them in understanding their own identities and their relationship to others. Fisher explains that the functions of the dual myths of the American Dream "are

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to provide meaning, identity, a comprehensive understandable image of the world and to support social order" (Fisher 161). The dramas of cross-class romances are focused on the union of the materialistic and the moralistic myths of the American Dream because they are fundamentally concerned with social integration. The film highlights the moralistic myth without denying the materialistic myth.

Pretty Woman, like most cross-class romantic films, demonstrates class conflicts can be overcome through 'true love.' That is, these films create an utopist relationship in which the materially rich but morally bankrupt characters and the materially poor but virtuous characters are conjoined in a harmonious expression of the total American Dream. This view is accomplished by distilling the serious social stratifications that create the unfair economic situations experienced by Americans into the filmic language of the individual. Such positioning is strengthened by the prevailing American belief that success or failure is individually determined rather than the result of socioeconomic conditions, despite the fact that "the game is fixed in advance, with the wealthy and influential determining the rules of access and reward (income) within U.S. society" (Braun 9). But individual personal failure is the only option open to most Americans as an explanation because social class cannot be seriously considered an option due to the predominance of the American Dream myths. "Social class," argues Pogrebin, "is an especially complex category of inquiry because in our deeply class-divided and class-prejudiced American society almost everyone identifies as 'middle class' and then claims that class doesn't matter" (144). Therefore, the sanctioned way of discussing these issues is in terms of the American Dream myths.

In *Pretty Woman*, the economic conditions that divide the US population are reduced to the problems of individual characters and are solved through a cross-class relationship. The result is that the gulf that exists between the affluent and underprivileged is replaced by a harmonious relationship between individuals who personify both material security and moral goodness. The upper class and lower class protagonists are united in a rhetorical rehabilitation of a divided society; a rhetoric that extends to its audience a heartening, placating and recuperating view of the United States as the exalted land of the American Dream.

At the end of *Pretty Woman*, rich and successful Edward is spiritually renewed and wants to use his money to produce rather than destroy. He sweeps Vivian off the floor of her low-class apartment and carries her away in his limo. Vivian has personified the values of compassion, charity, tolerance, and a regard for the self-worth of others from the beginning of the movie. Her moralistic value system transformed Edward. Together they are the symbolic union of the two myths of the American Dream. As they drive away the Dream

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that the street prophet referred to is finally realized for all of us. But the dream is not the Cinderella fantasy of a good girl being swept off her feet and carried away by her chivalrous knight in shining armor. Instead it is the American Dream, because unlike the Cinderella tales, in these movies both characters are saved and the dream of a classless American society is saved along with them.

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