

Analysis of the Representation of Women in *Pretty Woman*

The way in which women are represented in the media is a topic that is often debated in society today. While the importance of having independent female characters on television and in movies is regularly stressed, it is also crucial to have them embrace their femininity in order to relate to female audiences. This conflict between the different ideas of what it means to be a woman is known as fragmented subjectivity (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011). Unfortunately, the movie *Pretty Woman*, despite having a feisty female protagonist in the Hollywood Boulevard prostitute Vivian, ultimately sends the wrong message about the role that women play in society. Even though the movie *Pretty Woman* features a strong-willed heroine, it makes an anti-feminist statement by objectifying women and perpetuating the notion that having a man is the ultimate happy ending.

Although Vivian is first introduced to the audience as self-assured and comfortable with who she is, she begins to lose that unique spunk once she enters the world of the high-powered businessman Edward. At the beginning of the movie, Vivian seems to be someone who can take care of herself and is in control of her own life. She doesn't do drugs unlike the people she hangs out with and turns down the idea of having a pimp because he would tell her what to do. Although she wants more for herself, she isn't embarrassed that she is a hooker and does what she can to get by through remaining emotionally detached.

Vivian meets Edward when he gets lost driving down Hollywood Boulevard. She asks him if he's interested in her services but ends up getting in his car just to give him directions to

his hotel. While in the car together, Edward questions her choice of profession and she makes it very clear that she's responsible: she always uses condoms and gets herself checked for any STDs. When he makes a snide comment, she lets him know "if you're making fun of me, I don't like it" (Marshall, 1990). She is unashamed of what she does and is secure enough to let those who judge her for her lifestyle know that.

When they arrive at the hotel, Edward invites her up to his room and after spending a night together, offers to pay her \$3000 to stay the week with him. From there on out, Vivian's confident demeanor starts to falter. All of a sudden Vivian is attending polo matches and needing to learn proper table etiquette. This was an environment she was completely unfamiliar with. She was being put in a situation where she had to conform and hide who she really was. The strain of having to adjust and deal with the condescending upper class took its toll and quickly broke her down. It was obvious in her body language that she was out of her element; when she became uncomfortable, she hunched her shoulders and crossed her arms.

When she becomes angry with Edward because he told his lawyer that she is a hooker, she tries to regain that assertiveness by telling him "I'm not your toy, you don't own me" (Marshall, 1990). But by then her emotions have taken over, and she comes off as insecure and desperate for the sassy attitude she used to have. This plays off the stereotype that women are irrational and prone to hysterics (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011). Even though Edward brought her into high society, it made her lose all respect for herself, as she tells him "I never had anybody make me feel as cheap as you did today" (Marshall, 1990). Vivian was not a role model by any means, but she was genuine and witty, able to keep up with any cracks made about her. She represented a tough female whose strength despite all the criticism around her was something to be admired. But she becomes a shadow of the woman she once was after trying to fit in as

Edward's arm candy. Vivian losing the personality traits that made her special because of a relationship is the exact opposite of the empowerment that feminism stands for.

As a hooker, Vivian is selling her body, a profession that is almost exclusively female because they are commonly seen as sex objects (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011). This disparity between the careers of her and Edward makes him look superior and gives the impression that he's doing her a favor by taking her off the streets. Vivian and Edward live completely different lives. She didn't make it past 11th grade, while he rides in limousines and stays in hotel penthouses. This stark contrast is seen in the opening scenes of the movie when Edward leaves a fancy cocktail party in Beverly Hills and drives into the dirty, gritty, drug-ridden culture of Hollywood Boulevard. Comparing the guys in suits discussing business deals to the scantily clad streetwalkers exemplifies that it is the men's role to earn the big bucks and women are just supposed to look nice. Even today women still commonly have lower paying jobs than men, and are mostly confined to subordinate occupations (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011).

Edward is so consumed by work that he can't maintain a healthy relationship. He's divorced and his current girlfriend just left him so he didn't have anyone to accompany him to the many social events he's expected to attend. This is initially why he asks Vivian to spend the week with him, assuming that she'll accept because it was a lucrative offer for someone working corners. He says he has a "business proposition" for her and likens it to how he would hire someone to work for his company. Being unable to find a girlfriend who will put up with his work schedule, he decides to pay for one who, in his words, "will be at his beck and call" with no romance required (Marshall, 1990). And so, their relationship starts with Edward basically considering himself Vivian's boss, which puts her in an extremely demeaning position. He doesn't hesitate to hold this over her either, reminding her "you are, in fact, a hooker, and you

are my employee” (Marshall, 1990), as well as implying that she didn’t have any better options out there anyway. Yet he later won’t admit to these condescending statements, saying “I never treated you like a prostitute” (Marshall, 1990) when his behavior made it clear he felt he was better than her because of his powerful social status.

Edward isn’t the only one to patronize Vivian due to the fact that she is a hooker. His lawyer, Stuckey, is outright insulting and offensive towards her and mentions that maybe they could spend a night together after Edward leaves. He doesn’t even think twice about his awful behavior because he believes it’s acceptable to treat a hooker that way. His line of thought is that if she’s willing to be paid for sex, she’s so trashy that there isn’t any need for manners. This is an instance of the problematic virgin/whore binary that is applied to women. Either a woman is entirely pure and innocent, or she sleeps around (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011). Yes, sleeping with men is how Vivian made a living, but that didn’t mean people could take advantage of her whenever they wanted. She didn’t want to be regarded as a cheap slut with no self-decency.

It is shown that Vivian took those putdowns to heart when she is put in a potentially life-changing situation. Edward wants her to come back with him to New York, as they have both developed feelings for each other. He offers to get her an apartment there but Vivian is afraid that he will still think of her as a prostitute even if he’s not paying her anymore. But she knows from all the times that she’s been considered worthless that this is a fantastic opportunity. She tells Edward that she’s aware that “it’s a really good offer for a girl like me” (Marshall, 1990) but she says it sadly, like she wants him to think that she deserves more. While Vivian’s career choice in which she exploits her body is degrading to women, what speaks even worse about the representation of women is how men are constantly dominating them, something that is very disappointing to feminists.

The background characters are much more respectful and polite towards Vivian when she starts to wear fancier clothing instead of her own clothes. This vast difference in their actions is due solely to her appearance, which women are relentlessly scrutinized over (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011). Edward covers her up with his coat when they enter the hotel on their first night together because he knows that her outfit would draw a lot of unwanted attention and that she would be immediately judged. The next day he gives her money to go shopping, asking her to buy clothes that are conservative and elegant. This is partially because he knows that if she shows up to parties with him looking undignified, it would cause him to look bad as well.

Vivian tries to go shopping on Rodeo Drive wearing what she had on the night before: a short miniskirt, cut out tank top and thigh-high boots. She sticks out very conspicuously walking past the designer stores because the people surrounding her are wearing expensive clothing. It is very noticeable that as she walks down the street people are blatantly staring at her, with women looking in disgust and men turning around to get a second glance. When she enters a store and starts to look around, the salespeople are very rude to her and she gets asked to leave the store. One woman tells her “I don’t think we have anything for you; you are obviously in the wrong place” (Marshall, 1990). Just based on how she looks, they don’t believe that she could afford anything in their store, and treat her as if she’s low class. When Vivian returns to the store a few days later in a beautiful dress carrying bags of purchases, the saleslady doesn’t even recognize her. Vivian reminds her of the incident and lets her know how big of a mistake it was to not wait on her. This time when she walks down Rodeo Drive, she garners a lot of looks but in a very positive way. Women are admiring her dress and men are captivated by her beauty, even though she’s showing barely any skin.

The hotel manager at first expresses his distaste for Vivian's presence at his hotel, mostly because he's concerned of the reaction of the other guests seeing her in the swanky lobby inappropriately dressed. He tries to be polite because he knows that she is Edward's guest, but he makes it clear that once Edward leaves he does not want to see her in his hotel again. However after she gets a new wardrobe, whenever she walks through the lobby he smiles, as though he's very pleased because her new image reflects quite well on the hotel. He actually lets her know when she says goodbye that she's welcome back any time, making clear that his opinion of her has totally changed because she now fits in with his clientele.

The hotel manager also makes an interesting observation before Edward is about to leave having just parted ways with Vivian. Edward is returning a necklace that he had borrowed for Vivian to wear and the hotel manager looks at it and remarks "it must be difficult to let go of something so beautiful" (Marshall, 1990). It is apparent that he is actually referring to Vivian but it is intriguing that he chose to compare her to a material item. Although he meant it as a compliment, all that a necklace does is sit there and look pretty. Despite all the progress that has been made, women are still considered very much "to be looked at" and appearance is crucial to be approved by society and this is a mindset that feminism is trying to fight (Iftkhar, S., March 22, 2011).

Even though Vivian decides to start out fresh on her own, she throws that all away when Edward comes back for her because it turns out all she really wants is a man to save her. When Edward asks her to come back to New York with him, she admits that when she was young she used to imagine a prince coming to rescue her. She says they can't be together because she won't settle for less than the fairy tale she's always dreamed of. This seems to be the right choice because at the end of the movie she's about to leave for San Francisco and plans to finish high

school and get a real job. It's wonderful to see that she's going to turn her life around and has goals set for herself and it seems as though she's on the path to accomplishment.

However, soon before she leaves, she hears honking outside her window and in grand fashion a limousine drives up to her apartment with Edward standing up through the sunroof shouting "Princess Vivian!" (Marshall, 1990). He then proceeds to hop out of the limo and climb up the fire escape to "rescue her". It was indeed a scene straight out of a fairy tale, and as she takes him back wholeheartedly and they kiss, that is considered her happy ending. However, nothing that she had reserves about when she left him had changed. He had picked her up on a street corner and paid her for sex, and even though they are now in love, it would still be hard to shake that dynamic.

Also, although it isn't explicit, it seems as though the moment she climbs out her window to meet Edward on the fire escape that all of her other plans for the future go out the window as well. Edward is a billionaire; if she were with him she wouldn't have to finish her education or get a job because he could support her. It's really a shame because she goes back on everything she had said before about wanting more by getting caught up in the romance of it all. Having Vivian realize that she could really be successful would have been a happy ending in itself that epitomizes the idea of feminism. But what she wished for even more was to be saved instead of always having to fend for herself. This result is neither inspiring for women nor does it reflect on them well.

Pretty Woman could be seen as a modern Cinderella story, a girl with big dreams in a hopeless situation that gets swept off her feet by Prince Charming. But what it says about women is that they need a man to complete their life. The way that women are portrayed in this old-fashioned kind of allegory could have a negative affect on young women. This movie is just as

unrealistic as any fairy tale out there, but because it is in a contemporary setting, some young women might believe it to be plausible. These kinds of stories are what leads them to think that all they have to do is stand idly by waiting for the man of their dreams to come along instead of actively solving their problems and making a life for themselves. This movie is also sustaining the concept that's already endorsed substantially by advertisements that for women, what matters most to society is how they look and so they should be obsessed with maintaining their appearance.

This movie also gives the wrong idea about women to men by making it seem that at heart they all are vulnerable and need to be rescued. It does not fight any preconceptions about women in the work force because there are no examples of females in high-powered jobs. Although Vivian is someone to be reckoned with in the beginning, she is shown ultimately being wooed by a guy she had just walked away from. As a result, it ends up displaying women as weak and passes up an opportunity to show that a woman can go on just fine without a man.

Pretty Woman represents women poorly through its antifeminist viewpoint. Like the title states, Vivian, who at first embodied many important aspects of feminism, ended up just like any other beautiful girl in a designer dress. She became bland, and no longer challenged Edward in that same way in did when she met him. How she chose to put her other dreams aside so she could fall into a man's arms makes women appear dependent and undetermined. This movie had the chance to contradict preconceived notions about the role that women play in society but instead went right along with them. Although there is nothing wrong with expressing femininity, when it comes off as helpless, it can have a negative impact.

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