

“We Say Who, When, and How Much: Feminism in *Pretty Woman*”

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In 1990, Touchstone Pictures released a film that became a cultural icon and box office success: *Pretty Woman*. Directed by Garry Marshall, the film starred Julia Roberts and Richard Gere and depicted the relationship between a Los Angeles sex worker and a wealthy corporate raider. The film has since been interpreted by various scholars as both having feminist ideology and as reinforcing gender stereotypes. In this essay, I argue that *Pretty Woman*, while in some ways reflects feminist ideology, is overall a woman’s film which places a woman at the center of the story while positioning heterosexual marriage and family as that woman’s goal.

The film’s plot follows a Los Angeles sex worker, Vivian Ward, who meets corporate raider Edward Lewis when he is lost trying to find his hotel. She takes him back to his hotel, spends the night with him, and Edward then reveals to her that he is in town for the week on business and needs someone to act as his date for the social events he needs to attend. Edward and Vivian agree that she will spend the week as his “beck-and-call girl” for \$3,000. He purchases a new wardrobe for Vivian as part of the deal, teaching her to act and dress like an upper-class lady. The two attend polo matches, business dinners at fancy restaurants, and the opera. A subplot of the film features Edward’s takeover of a shipbuilding company, Morse Industries, where the elderly owner fights to keep his business and Edward is eventually convinced to help the man rather than financially destroy him. Over the course of the week, however, Vivian and Edward fall in love and end the film with Edward coming to Vivian’s apartment to declare his love for her.

The argument for feminist ideology within *Pretty Woman* begins with Vivian herself. She is independent, makes her own decisions, and holds herself and her roommate, Kit, to a motto of “We say who. We say when. We say how much.”¹ They work as independent prostitutes, choosing to look after themselves and decide their own clientele and rates rather than working with a pimp. Kit argues that their lives would be easier if they worked with a pimp but Vivian refuses, saying “And then he’ll run our lives and take our money. No.” Vivian refuses to work under the patriarchal influence of a pimp and instead she and Kit support each. Film professor Hilary Radner argues this displays a new type of femininity grown from the increase in working women in the 1980s and 1990s. She posits that “this new femininity defines itself and its pleasures (its libidinal economy) on a marketplace in which her capital is constituted by her body and her sexual expertise, which she herself exchanges. She is not exchanged by men, but acts as her own agent...”² This implies some level of feminism on Vivian’s part: she is defining herself by a new version of femininity and controlling the exchange of her own body without the influence of a man.

The narrative of a sex worker getting a happy ending also holds a feminist basis. In film tradition, women who express control over their sexuality tend to end the film by dying or becoming socially ruined. This is the archetype known as the femme fatale, an attractive or seductive female character whose “longing for financial independence by way of sexual initiative makes her so threatening to traditional phallogocentric authority.”³ Femme fatales typically appear in crime, drama, or noir films. Because *Pretty Woman* is categorized as a lighthearted romantic comedy, Vivian cannot be considered a true femme fatale. However, she does fit many

¹ *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Touchstone, 1990).

² Hilary Radner, “Pretty is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York and London: Routledge, 1993): 59.

³ Jack Boozer, “The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition,” *Journal of Film and Video* 51, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1999/2000): 21.

characteristics of one as a woman in control of her own sexuality and using sex for financial independence. She ends the film by leaving a life of prostitution and stating that she will make something different of her life, which is a vastly different idea from previous depictions of sexually powerful women. Arguably, this happy ending, along with Vivian's openness about prostitution and sexuality, shows feminist ideology.

The question of feminism is additionally raised in a scene towards the end of the film. After Vivian has left Edward's hotel for the final time, she returns to her apartment shared with Kit. Vivian begins packing to leave for San Francisco while Kit attempts to persuade her to stay in L.A. Kit asks what she will do in San Francisco, and Vivian responds with, "Get a job. Finish high school. I got things I can do. I used to make pretty good grades in high school."⁴ In her essay published in the *Journal of American Culture*, Karol Kelley argues that in these scene "Vivian seems ready to 'pursue her own visions' and 'prepare herself to realize her own ambitions and to define her own identity.'"⁵ Vivian became a prostitute because she followed a man to Los Angeles and could not find work elsewhere; now, she is realizing her own potential and defining her own life. She also follows the feminist ideology of women supporting women in this scene: she gives part of her money from Edward to Kit, hoping that Kit will use the money to better her own life in turn.

Furthermore, English professor Gregory Graham-Smith argues in his essay "Sculptor or Sculpted? The Subversion of the Pygmalion Myth in *Pretty Woman: A New Dialectic*" that Vivian actually holds more power in the film than many scholars interpret. According to Graham-Smith, *Pretty Woman* is a subversion of the Pygmalion myth in which the character of

⁴ *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Touchstone, 1990).

⁵ Karol Kelley, "A Modern Cinderella," *Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 92.

Pygmalion creates a statue named Galatea and brings her to life with his love. Graham-Smith contends that

as a modern Galatea, Vivian Ward (played by Julia Roberts) is an acutely independent and fully-fledged character, despite her seemingly subservient role as a purveyor of sex, pandering to male fantasies. The film shows her to be a live, breathing statue...She seems to be a victim of stereotyped sexual roles, but she ultimately transcends the paralyzing immobility of the typecast prostitute. She is herself before Edward Lewis (played by Richard Gere) touches her. In fact, she touches *him* into life, initiating his education from stereotypical businessman (Italian suits, silk ties, gold cuff-links) into real rather than feigned manhood. She is the sculptor, he the sculpted.⁶

Graham-Smith sees Vivian as Pygmalion in the story. She brings Edward to life by teaching him to appreciate the world outside of work. This is exhibited most particularly in the scenes where she shows him old *I Love Lucy* episodes and encourages him to relax by picnicking outside with their bare feet in the grass. Vivian's transformation is purely physical: her internal characteristics remain the same, her personality does not change. This can be interpreted as feminism because Vivian appears to hold more power in the relationship.

Similarly, Elizabeth Scala argues that *Pretty Woman* can be interpreted as an inversion of the medieval romance of the fair unknown, in which a knight of unknown heritage rescues a damsel and finds his rightful place among the aristocracy. Scala reasons that Vivian is the fair unknown in the film: once she gets the clothing to match Edward's lifestyle, she fits right in like she has always belonged there. Kit makes multiple mentions of the fact that she felt Vivian never truly belonged in the life of a sex worker, and the most telling scene in Scala's analysis is the scene in which Vivian and Edward attend the opera. Without knowing the language or the story, Vivian cries at the opera and feels a strong connection to it, implying that she belongs among Edward's elite lifestyle. She also arguably rescues Edward by showing him a compassionate way to run his business and teaching him to appreciate the world outside of work, fitting the narrative

⁶ Gregory Graham-Smith, "Sculptor or Sculpted? The Subversion of the Pygmalion Myth in *Pretty Woman: A New Dialectic*," *Myth and Symbol* 1 (1993): 89.

of the fair unknown rescuing a love interest. Scala states that, “if it is possible to see *Pretty Woman* as a romance of the fair unknown, - in fact, an inversion of such a romance’s traditionally heroic roles – and it is possible to see how the film works as a self-conscious display of the powers of Hollywood romance, then it is also possible to see in *Pretty Woman* a potentially ‘private’ feminism.”⁷

However, these arguments for feminism within *Pretty Woman* focus on individual aspects of the film rather than the narrative as a whole. The narrative itself follows the marriage plot, in which a man and woman meet, fall in love, and assumedly or explicitly marry at the end. In her essay “*Pretty Woman* Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship,” performance studies professor D. Soyini Madison says, “American women grew up with the marriage-plot fairy tale, and for some more than others, to be beautiful, to be adored by a special man, and to live with him happily ever after is a fairy tale turned life goal. *Pretty Woman* reinscribes in live action the Cinderella fairy tale of heterosexual love and marriage as the ultimate resolution for a fulfilled life, particularly for women.”⁸ The feminist aspects of *Pretty Woman* are overruled by the general narrative of the marriage plot and the reinforcement of heterosexual marriage, making it instead a woman’s film.

Though Vivian does work independently and controls her own life as a sex worker, she fits many feminine stereotypes. In order for the audience – and Edward – to like Vivian and believe her worthy of a happy ending rather than the tragedies associated with the femme fatale, she must be portrayed as a “good” girl who has fallen into a bad situation. Radner argues that

⁷ Elizabeth Scala, “Pretty Women: The Romance of the Fair Unknown, Feminism, and Contemporary Romantic Comedy,” *Film & History, An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 29, no. 1-2 (1999): 43.

⁸ D. Soyini Madison, “*Pretty Woman* Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 100.

what eventually constitutes her ‘goodness,’ that which persuades Edward that he must in fact keep her, is a complicated issue. For although Vivian is not chaste, she does have ‘moral values,’ a firm sense of decency and fairness towards others. This is what Edward, a corporate raider, lacks and what he needs Vivian to teach him: Edward is a rake in the 18th-Century sense, but one who rapes companies instead of women. It is Vivian who will bring him back to the fold of a capitalism regulated by the law of the family and patriarchal responsibility.⁹

Vivian’s role is to teach Edward that he has been neglecting his patriarchal obligations as a businessman. His role is to look after the workers of each company he buys, and he has instead been putting them out of work. Vivian points out that he is behaving immorally, and through her compassion persuades him to work with Mr. Morse to save Morse Industries rather than to tear it down. She reminds him of his masculine responsibilities and supports him in them, fulfilling the role of a “good” girl subservient to her man.

Additionally, the construction of her character within the film is intentionally done to tell the audience that she is worthy of redemption. Madison reasons that

the ways in which Vivian’s character is disclosed – a pretty, white woman who just happens to earn her living as a prostitute – are carefully choreographed to distance her from grime and crime. At first glance, it would seem that a bold, unchaste, street hooker would disqualify as princess, but she becomes an acceptable princess heroine because, after all, she is beautiful and white and clean: she flosses her teeth, she doesn’t kiss on the mouth, she doesn’t use drugs, and she uses color-coded condoms. She is also pure at heart, whimsical, and although sassy, she is sweetly spirited and can appreciate both the low farce of *I Love Lucy* and the high art of opera.¹⁰

This proves to the audience that Vivian does not belong among the prostitutes with whom she associates. Kit tells Vivian that in her new clothes she “sure don’t fit in down on the Boulevard looking like you do, not that you ever did.”¹¹ If Vivian does not fit the traditional idea of a morally deficient prostitute, then the audience can root for her to get a happy ending and fall in love with a wealthy, upper-class man. Vivian’s characterization very much insinuates that women must fulfill certain qualities and characteristics in order to be worthy of a happy ending. Anything that removes a woman from a patriarchal home and family – such as engaging in sex

⁹ Radner, “Pretty is as Pretty Does,” 62.

¹⁰ Madison, “*Pretty Woman* Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship,” 102.

¹¹ *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Touchstone, 1990).

work – disqualifies her from this happy ending. Vivian, in contrast, is allowed to have this type of ending because she is portrayed as someone in a bad situation who has inherently good qualities and is still seeking to return to home and family, placing *Pretty Woman* as a woman's film.

Vivian's whiteness is also essential to the construction of *Pretty Woman* as a woman's film. One of the foundations of feminism is intersectionality, or the idea that every person has multiple identities that exist concurrently, such as race, gender, or class, and none is more important than the others. Intersectionality does not exist in *Pretty Woman* in any form. The only noticeable characters of color are Edward's chauffeur, Darryl, and a street talker present at both the beginning and ending of the film talking about dreams in Hollywood, the minimal roles of which "reflect the peripheral importance of black people in white people's stories and lives."¹² Additionally, Vivian's story can only progress as it does because she is white. Her race is not acknowledged because the "invisible norm" assumes that whiteness is the primary default, and therefore white people do not have a race. Yet Vivian's race is a vital aspect of her storyline.

Madison claims that

what Radner fails to consider in her analysis of gender and class issues in this economic exchange is the implicit impact of race. Vivian's being stared at in an exclusive hotel and being asked to leave a boutique may seem contrived and a little silly to black women who experience this kind of humiliation constantly in various forms no matter how they are dressed. For Vivian, class discrimination is turned to wonder and glowing admiration by merely changing her style and fashion...Vivian's race is not a subject of explicit significance in the film; however, it is fundamentally significant that only because she is a white woman, a 'pretty' white woman, can the plot unfold in the manner that it does.¹³

Because Vivian is white, she is able to gain upward class mobility and lose the stigma associated with prostitution. Once she has a better wardrobe and learns how to act around high society, she blends in due to her whiteness. A black woman, in contrast, would be discriminated against due

¹² Madison, "*Pretty Woman* Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship," 101.

¹³ Madison, "*Pretty Woman* Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship," 101.

to both her class and her race, meaning a black protagonist in *Pretty Woman* would not be able to move between class distinctions so fluidly. She would still face discrimination from the upper class due to her blackness, which Vivian does not face as a white woman. Because this intersectionality is never discussed, *Pretty Woman* cannot be fully considered a feminist film.

Additionally, while scholars like Graham-Smith and Scala argue that Vivian holds more power than Edward within the relationship, this power is based on Vivian's stereotypically feminine characteristics. Of the two, Edward holds all of the economic and social power. When Vivian needs a new wardrobe, she is unable to go shopping without Edward's help because the shop employees discriminate against her, assuming, based on her current wardrobe, that she cannot afford to shop there. Edward gains the respect of the shop employees due to both his wealth and his status as a man, holding this economic and social power over Vivian. In contrast, Vivian's power over Edward is purely emotional, a stereotypically feminine trait. Vivian teaches Edward how to relax, to spend less time at work, and to look out for his workers rather than destroying their livelihoods. She also encourages him to come to terms with his father's death by subtly pushing him toward the fatherly influence of Mr. Morse through a new working relationship. Edward expresses dissatisfaction with his relationship with his own father, yet Vivian's influence results in the elderly Mr. Morse telling Edward, "I find this hard to say without sounding condescending, but I'm proud of you"¹⁴ after Edward decides to help the company. While Graham-Smith and Scala are correct in stating that Vivian does hold power in the relationship through these actions, the fact that these actions and characteristics are typecasts of feminine characters means Vivian's power reinforces traditional gender roles, following the purpose of a woman's film.

¹⁴ *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Touchstone, 1990).

Traditional gender roles are also encouraged through the occupations shown within the film. For example, Kelley argues that

gender clearly determines occupations and activities. . .Edward is a businessman working with male executives, lawyers, bankers and senators. Of course his telephone operator is female. Vivian provides female services for men. Lacking job skills she is unable to support herself by any other kind of work open to her, and she must struggle to keep some control over her own body and out of the hands of male pimps. The hotel and store managers are men; the sales clerks are women. The expectations presented are that women are supposed to work, but that men are to hold the superior and better-paying jobs ¹⁵

While it is never stated that these jobs are intentionally gendered, audiences take away an impactful message nonetheless. Since no women are shown in positions of power at work, this tells audiences that women are meant to work menial jobs for lower pay because they should have a husband to provide for them. This is also encouraged through Edward's offer to Vivian at the end of their week together. He offers to buy her an apartment in New York and provide her with credit cards, a chauffeured car, and any material goods she could wish for. He wants to continue their relationship and he believes the best way to do so is to economically provide for her. While Vivian rejects this offer initially, she claims it is because she wants love and an emotional connection as well, not just economic stability. This sends the message that women should want love and family as their goal over all else.

Vivian's ultimate desire throughout the film follows the marriage plot strongly, as she focuses on her idea of a fairy tale. When Edward offers to take her to New York, she tells him that she used to imagine herself as a princess locked in a tower in a fairy tale, waiting to be rescued by a knight on a white horse. This idea of a woman waiting to be rescued by a man insinuates that men are dominant and that women do not have the power to save themselves, making them dependent on men. Because this is Vivian's motivating factor in rejecting Edward, she implies that her main goal in life is to fall in love and get married rather than improve her

¹⁵ Kelley, "A Modern Cinderella," 89.

economic situation. When Edward tells her that his offer will at least get her off the streets, she responds with “that’s just geography.”¹⁶ While it can be argued that Vivian’s refusal is due to her standards as an independent woman, the fact that she uses her fairy tale as her rebuttal means Vivian prioritizes love over anything else. Her goal of heterosexual marriage teaches young girls that their goal should also be to marry a successful man and that will solve all of their problems and that they will be “rescued” by love.

In fact, Vivian does need to be quite literally rescued by Edward. After Edward changes his deal with Morse Industries, his lawyer Stuckey shows up at the hotel suite looking for him. However, Stuckey finds Vivian there alone and attempts to rape her as revenge for Edward’s decision. Edward arrives in time to pull Stuckey away from Vivian, but she is unable to defend herself against Stuckey and then needs to be cared for afterwards by Edward. While there is feminist potential in a portrayal of attempted rape of a prostitute, the scene’s intention is to give Edward a heroic moment and further emphasize Vivian’s dependence on him rather than give any social commentary.

The film ends with Edward realizing he is in love with Vivian and pursuing her back to her apartment. As she packs to leave L.A., he arrives outside her window and climbs up the fire escape in an imitation of the fairy tale she previously told him. Edward asks her what happens after the princess is rescued by the knight, and Vivian’s reply is, “she rescues him right back,”¹⁷ referring to her “rescue” of Edward from his emotional turmoil. The credits roll as Vivian and Edward kiss on the fire escape, leaving the viewer to interpret what the rest of their story is. Graham-Smith argues “the movie remains open-ended too, to an extent, because we are not actually shown what happens to Vivian and Edward, whether they do, in fact, live happily ever

¹⁶ *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Touchstone, 1990).

¹⁷ *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Touchstone, 1990).

after.”¹⁸ However, the natural progression of the film leads the audience to believe that Vivian and Edward most likely got married after the film’s end. The viewer can guess that Vivian gave up on her decision to finish school and get a better job and is instead supported by Edward as his wife, positing heterosexual love and marriage as the ultimate culmination of Vivian’s journey. This focus on Vivian’s fairy tale, and the overall marriage plot within the film, serve to reinforce traditional gender roles, making *Pretty Woman* a women’s film.

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