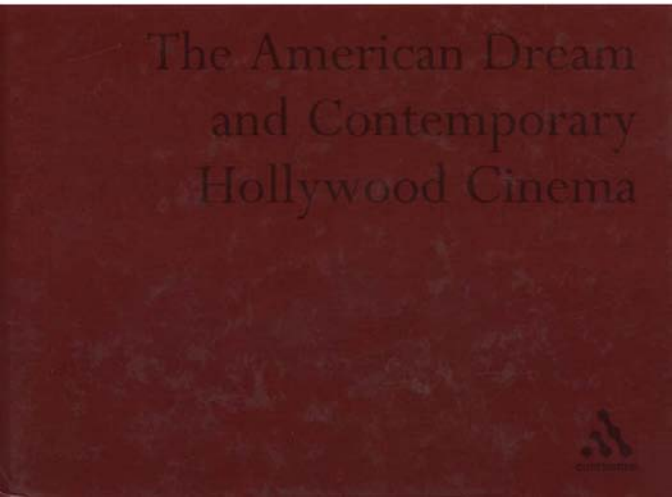
J. Emmett Winn

The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema



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I dedicate this book to my maternal grandmother, Ila Belle Williams Gandy (1890–1969). A widow, she raised eight children by sharecropping through the Great Depression and the Second World War in the poverty-stricken rural South. She and many other men and women like her are true twentieth-century American heroes.

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CHAPTER 1

The American Dream, Upward Mobility, and Hollywood Film

The American Dream is a cherished belief in American society. The United States is considered the land of opportunity despite one's race, color, creed, or national origin, an idea that is acknowledged in many parts of the world, especially in America. Most Americans believe that the American Dream allows individuals to succeed without being burdened by unfair limitations. Even a poor person with few resources can, through hard work and perseverance, achieve success. In this way, the American Dream is an egalitarian vision that is free of social constraints.

The American Dream is entrenched in American popular culture. Books, movies, TV shows, and songs express the basic ideals of the American Dream and, in turn, continually communicate it to a receptive audience. This book focuses on the American Dream and its representation in popular contemporary Hollywood film. It is not surprising that the American Dream has been in film since its early years in the United States. The rags-to-riches Horatio Alger and Cinderella tales that leapt into early cinema were already popular stories readily adaptable to the new technology. Cullen (2003, 5) explains that the American Dream long ago moved from print culture to "the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto."

Discussing the American Dream in contemporary Hollywood movies, however, requires a concrete vocabulary that elucidates its fundamental ideas; and mobility is the most basic aspect of the American Dream of success. Birdsall and Graham (1999, 195) point out that

"mobility is at the root of the American Dream" and that the American Dream fundamentally means the ability to move upward through class levels. Cullen (2003, 8) calls upward mobility one of "the most familiar American Dreams . . . a dream typically understood in terms of economic and/or social advancement." This is in keeping with the ideals of the dream and with the basic assumption that the American Dream is about people bettering themselves. Despite this, the level or measure of success cannot be quantified in specific economic terms. A poor homeless boy raised in an orphanage until he is a young man who works hard and rises to a position as a supervisor in a factory job is just as much about the American Dream as a young woman who turns her love for making clothes into a business that makes her one of the most recognized and wealthy designers in the world. The difference in income levels between the factory worker and the fashion designer is large, yet both are success stories that uphold the ideals of the dream.

Mobility in the American Dream is about a person who elevates himself or herself as a result of hard work and individual endeavor. This mobility is not measured in strict economic terms, for it is about more than just money—it is about people making better lives for themselves. A poor boy who turns to illegal drug dealing in order to make huge sums of money may vastly improve his income level, but he has not achieved the American Dream. The dream is a move up, a positive change in social level, a better life. It is the mobility inherent in a shift from the ranks of the poor to the middle class or from the working class to the professional upper class.

In the United States, the idea of social classes is a conundrum. Although most Americans feel comfortable saying that they are middle class, they do not think of the United States as a classed society. In fact, on closer inspection, the American Dream is inherently indebted to an idea that social classes do not exist in a concrete way in the United States. The American Dream is based on the idea that America is a free society unconstrained by social limitations such as castes or classes. Pogrebin (1987, 144) explains this complex belief by stating that in "American society almost everyone identifies as 'middle class' and then claims that class doesn't matter." The basis of this dual nature is the social mobility

at the heart of the American Dream. In order to be socially mobile, there must be some way of measuring the change or the movement. The concept of social classes is a practical way to discuss this change. Most Americans think of themselves as middle class; and, in fact, terms such as "high class" and "low class" are in common use in America. Therefore, the accepted idea that there are permeable social classes through which movement is possible in the United States is a common way of talking about social mobility and about how it is understood by most Americans. Americans recognize that classes are apparent in U.S. society but believe that a person's affiliation with a class is not fixed. Further, Americans feel that class affiliation is not predominantly important because most Americans feel that the United States is mostly one large middle class.

Perception and reality conflict since the United States has one of the largest income gaps between the poor and the wealthy of any industrialized nation (Mantsios 1992; Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005). Surprisingly, the gulf between the rich and the poor widened significantly during the 1990s (Miringoff and Miringoff 1999). Despite the economic boom of the 1990s, real-dollar weekly wages have been declining since the early 1970s (Miringoff and Miringoff 1999); and since 2001, "the wage growth of many workers has continued to slow and is now falling behind inflation" (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005, 9). Moreover, the United States has the "worst record" of child poverty of the industrialized countries (Miringoff and Miringoff 1999, 80). These steady economic losses for the last thirty-five years leave Americans in a situation that is in stark contrast to the cherished belief in the American Dream of success. The richest 10 percent of families own over 70 percent of American wealth. Perhaps even more telling is that the top one-half percent hold over 35 percent of the wealth (Mantsios 1992). Sawhill (2000, 27) states, "The distribution of income in the United States is, according to all the evidence, less equal than in other industrialized countries." DeParle (2004, 327) explains that it is "the growing income gaps that increasingly define American life."

America is not a huge middle class. Zweig (2000) points out that the majority of Americans are working class. Ehrenreich (1989) suggests

that the working class makes up 60 to 70 percent of the population. Fiske (1987, 214) states, "[I]n our society power is distributed along the axes of gender, class and race," and the privileged profit to the detriment of all others. While the belief in a classless America endures in the American Dream, the very stratification that it denies unfairly affects the majority of Americans. Zweig (2004, 1) explains that "Euphemisms about the middle class and consumer society are no longer persuasive when chief executives pay themselves tens of millions of dollars while their employees are thrown out of work with ruined pensions." The traditional rhetoric suggests that all Americans are pulling together to make the United States better for everyone. But as Zweig further points out, "When huge tax cuts go the richest 1 percent . . . while workers suffer the burdens of lost public services, people wonder if we're really all in this together." In fact, Wright (1996) explains that the advances in working-class jobs of the past are disappearing:

> The "good jobs" that have traditionally provided the way up for Americans, offering opportunity to purchase homes and to send children to college, while giving health and pension protection for retirement years, are rapidly becoming relics of the past. Now "temporary" jobs—those with no benefits, no security, and minimal wages—are the way of the future. (518)

Ehrenreich (2005, 217) explains that these problems also affect the middle class: "[M]iddle-class Americans . . . have been raised with the old-time Protestant expectation that hard work will be rewarded . . . . This has never been true of the working class. . . . And now, the sociologists agree, it is increasingly untrue of the educated middle class." Finally, Scott and Leonhardt (2005, 1) make the point succinctly: "Americans are arguably more likely than they were 30 years ago to end up in the class into which they were born."

With the classic American Dream economically outdistancing most working-class people, Americans might question its veracity; however, the American Dream is resilient. Americans admit that social inequalities exist in the country and that they lead to the unfair distribution of resources; but these same individuals consider "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 1985, 578).

The American Language of Class

The everyday vernacular of social mobility is fluid and encompasses several different aspects of class in the United States. Class identity in American society is not just determined by economics, income, or birth status, as in other countries. In America, social class distinctions abound in lifestyle choices, cultural tastes, and social, secular, and religious affiliations. The privilege of those who identify themselves as upper class is based on cultural taste and educational level as well as on economic capital. How one dresses, what one eats and where, how one entertains oneself and others, one's civic involvements, how one speaks, one's leisure activities, and professional affiliations mark social class affiliation and taste cultures beyond income level. All these widely varying markers differentiate Americans between high class and ill bred; they separate rednecks, hardhats, and good-ole-boys from the well-bred, the cultured, and the eccentrics; they label people as ignorant or educated, stylish or cheap, mannered or uncouth, respectable or trash, and all the nuances in between. Social class markers and class distinctions are understood and employed in everyday socialization, stereotypes, prejudices, jokes, club memberships, and employment decisions. These subtle and overt distinctions inform Americans' understandings of their own and others' social class affiliations. Although many of the common class-based terms are used pejoratively, in this book, I follow Gans's use of such terms as upper and lower classes not as judgments, "but as rough indicators of positions in a socioeconomic hierarchy that has cultural implications" (1999, 7).

Given Americans' complex understanding of social class and key belief in the unfettered opportunity for the social mobility promised by the American Dream, it is important to investigate how these ideas are communicated in a coherent fashion to the point that the American Dream is a defining characteristic of the country's national identity.

Understanding the Resiliency of the American Dream

How does the American Dream continue to thrive in an America where it is increasingly difficult for working-class people to achieve upward mobility? One powerful way is its continued glorification in American popular culture. Carey (1989) explains that the media play an important role in society's communication and understanding of reality. The pursuit of the American Dream is a common plotline in Hollywood films. For example, *Working Girl*'s simple rags-to-riches storyline is the basic plot for dozens of Hollywood films. When the broader ideas of the American Dream are considered, many more Hollywood films are intrinsically based on this national credo. Given the ubiquitous nature of Hollywood motion pictures, it is apparent that the American Dream is alive and well in cinematic fare.

This book explains how contemporary Hollywood cinema reaffirms the preeminence of the American Dream. Critical theorists have long argued that the capitalist media prefer a hegemonic view that focuses on the wealthy, yet the enormous change in the disparity between the ultra-wealthy in the United States and the vast majority of Americans begs that the relationship between the media and social order be further explored ("Income gap," 2000; Miringoff and Miringoff 1999; Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 2001; Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005; "Poorest" 1997; "Rising tide" 1997; Shapiro 1995; Weinberg 1996). Herbert (2005, A19) argues that the divide between the rich and all other Americans is becoming "an unbridgeable gap."

Defining the American Dream

The American Dream assures that no class system hampers an individual's advancement, even though many Americans experience structural class limitations daily. At least partially because of the American Dream, Americans accept this contradiction. Fisher argues that myths such as the American Dream function to "provide meaning, identity, a comprehensive understandable image of the world and to support the social order" (1973, 161). Furthermore, Fisher explained that the American Dream is two myths: the materialistic success myth and the moralistic

myth of brotherhood, arguing 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" (1973, 161). The materialistic myth is concerned with "the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, 'playing the game,' initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success" (Fisher 1973, 161). Fisher shows how the values of the dual myths of the American Dream can, and do, support both the myth of upward mobility and a belief in the importance of all Americans despite their social backgrounds (the classless basis of the dream).

The American Dream, the Self, and Hollywood's Contemporary Era

This book focuses on the American Dream and its representation in popular contemporary Hollywood film. I approach the study of the American Dream from a perspective that sees film as one of the available resources that aid people in understanding their place in the world; individuals use narrative discourse as a way of understanding and coping with their problems. Erikson (1968) points out that in trying to understand personal identity, the importance of what we wish to be and what we have to work with predominates. In other words, the act of understanding identity is about how we negotiate who we are and what resources we have at our disposal for that negotiation.

I investigate what films communicate about the American Dream and its related social mobility. To do so, I explicate the morals that bring about success and failure for the characters in the narratives, and what the films offer individuals to help them understand their place in the American Dream. This research asks what contemporary Hollywood films communicate about Americans' needs to cope with success and failure in terms of the conflicting myths of a classless American society and the American Dream of upward mobility.

The present analysis is concerned with upward class mobility and identity as they relate to social order and demonstrates one way that rhetorical studies can advance social and cultural critique. This study contributes to the work of "rhetorical studies as a form of discursive

challenge to a variety of political, academic, and cultural-spheres" (Rosteck 1999, ix). Burke argues that humans use dramatic resources to construct and maintain their identities and their understanding of their relationship to others in society, and demonstrates how dramas depict human motives and invite audiences to evaluate those motives. By combining societal myths with individual motives, filmic narratives provide significant equipment for living that may aid viewers in evaluating their own and other people's motives in an effort to make sense of their situation (Burke 1941/1973). Fisher and Fillory (1982, 343) explain that through dramatic narratives we "do on occasion come to new beliefs, reaffirmations of old ones, reorient our values, and may even be led to action. We know . . . fictive forms of communication may have rhetorical intentions and consequences."

Payne (1996, 3–4) uses dramatism to explain that "film is a highly transformative world, where mythic and idealized powers of transformation are depicted, enacted, and highly personalized and where comparison, contrast, synthesis and merger of our symbolic vocabularies for identity change are crafted, revealed, and disseminated to the public at large." Filmic narratives that overtly portray characters grappling with class issues and succeeding in achieving upward mobility provide a way for individuals to understand their own struggles and class identities. Cinematic narratives are used as texts because film presents a remarkable resource for observing social definitions, myths, and cultural scripts about American society. In films, issues concerning the American Dream form the broad spectrum of economic, cultural, and educational capital that U.S. audiences recognize as social groups and social classes.

Film scholars generally agree that the contemporary era of filmmaking began in the later 1970s. This designation was motivated by changes in the movie industry caused by the advent of new technologies and business practices, an emphasis on blockbuster filmmaking, and related narrative styles and formulas. Because the concept of social class in the United States is not rigid, this book focuses on a contemporary view of the American Dream rather than one that was represented in films of past eras, such as 1930's *film noir*, the screwball romantic comedies of the 1940s, or other earlier films. The selection of films is limited to mainstream Hollywood

narrative texts that achieved box-office success, received critical acclaim, or stand out because of some other unique quality. In other words, foreign films, labor films, films that are made specifically to address class issues, documentaries, and experimental/abstract films have not been considered. The result of these selection criteria is a group of mainstream narrative Hollywood films that are widely recognized and acclaimed popularly and/or critically through a period of over twenty-five years. In this book, I analyze: *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Breaking Away* (1979), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Flashdance* (1983), *The Flamingo Kid* (1984), *Wall Street* (1987), *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1987), *Working Girl* (1988), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *White Palace* (1990), *Passion Fish* (1991), *The Fisher King* (1991), *The Firm* (1993), *Mrs. Winterbourne* (1996), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Titanic* (1997), and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002). The bulk of the films are from the 1980s and 1990s because these decades have been defined by social scholars as a time in which working-class and poor Americans suffered significant economic setbacks due to corporate greed, downsizing, and the shrinking of the middle class (Eisler 1983; Ehrenreich 1989; Higgins 2002; Jeffords 1994; Mantsios 1992; Samuelson 1999). The confluence of these social issues and changes in the film industry make this era a vital and productive period for a contemporary look at film and the American Dream. Social inequality is a significant theme in American life and one that invites close rhetorical scrutiny. The significance of these texts lies in the fact that the movies, their directors, and actors are popularly and critically acclaimed, and that the films have been widely seen in theaters and on broadcast and cable television and continue to be popular rentals in the video market.

Rhetorical Assessment of Filmic Value Systems

Narrative discourse provides a significant way for individuals to understand and cope with their everyday lives (Burke 1935/1984b; Campbell 1982; Fisher 1987; Jameson 1981). Scholars have established a significant link between the communication of societal myths and social values via filmic narratives as a significant focus of rhetorical studies (Aden 1994;

Brinson 1995; Brummet 1985, Frentz and Farrell 1975; Frentz and Hale 1983; Frentz and Rushing 1978; Payne 1989a, 1991, 1992, 1996; Rasmussen and Downey 1989, 1991; Rushing 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991; Rushing and Frentz 1978, 1980, 1989; Solomon and McMullen 1991). Ideological assumptions are ensconced in the media, myth, and culture (Hall 1979; Jameson 1991). In their analysis of ideology in contemporary Hollywood film, Ryan and Kellner argue that ideology is "an attempt to placate social tensions and to respond to social forces in such a way that they cease to be dangerous to the social system of inequality" (1988, 14). Rushing and Frentz (1978) have argued that many films prescribe specific value changes as ways of improving situations and life problems. They present the social value model, which explicates two types of value schemes. They term the replacement of one value system with another "dialectical transformation" and use the term "dialectical synthesis" to explain the fusion of competing systems.

Rushing (1983) has expanded the social value model to illustrate other methods of change by investigating the historical development of the American Western film genre. In doing so, Rushing illustrates dialectical reaffirmation, where the tension between two value systems is restated and expanded upon; dialectical emphasis, where one value system is featured over a competing value system; and dialectical pseudo-synthesis, where "the two disparate paradoxical elements are brought together . . . glossing over their inherently contradictory nature" (26). Further, Rushing (1985) demonstrates rhetorical transcendence in an analysis of the popular film *E.T.* Rhetorical transcendence occurs when the conflict between values can be transcended via a higher principle.

Continuing in the tradition of explicating how films rhetorically prescribe patterns of value change, Rasmussen and Downey (1989) investigates *Agnes of God* and articulates the concept of dialectical disorientation. Dialectical disorientation "emerges from conflict between two antithetical but complementary life worlds and results in a paradoxical acceptance of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the human condition" (Rasmussen and Downey 1989, 66). Brinson (1995) advances the rhetorical use of the social value model by incorporating the structuralist principle of mediation and illustrates this move by

demonstrating how the film *Mississippi Burning* communicates the myth of white superiority.

Rhetorical Analyses of the American Dream in Popular Culture

Fisher and Fillory (1982) employ Fisher's (1973) rhetorical explication of the American Dream to analyze the play *Death of Salesman* and the novel *The Great Gatsby*. They conclude that these dramatic narratives argue that "self-knowledge and acceptance are higher values" (361) than material success and suggest that films should also be investigated as significant sources of dramatic narratives concerning the American Dream. In that analytic vein, McMullen (1996) works from the tradition of rhetorical analyses of film and Fisher's (1973) work on the American Dream to investigate *Kramer vs. Kramer*. McMullen (1996, 35–36) finds that "the film reinforces the patriarchal grounding of the American Dream. Specifically, it envisions an affirming synthesis between materialism and moralism for men but excludes women from that same realization." Hoerl (2002, 261) argues, "Recent references to the American Dream in popular books and magazines suggest that the myth has lost its egalitarian edge," implying that the American Dream myth needs reaffirmation to continue to function ideologically. For example, in an analysis of media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings, Hoerl finds that news coverage reflected "broader anxieties about the declining status of the American Dream myth" (2002, 260). To repair this ideological rift, Hoerl (2002, 263) argues that "journalists' explanations for the . . . shootings suggests that news media coverage of the tragedy restored legitimacy to the American Dream by framing [middle-class suburban] adolescent youth as inherently evil monsters."

Scholars contend that the media, particularly the commercial visual media, act as our contemporary myths. Hirschman (2000), in an analysis of films and television shows, argues that these media offerings are the mythology of American culture. More specifically, Hirschman (2000, 157) asserts that by the 1980s, "American culture began settling down to do business. . . . In short, it was back to basics time: time to reassert basic cultural categories of good and evil, male and female, and God and

man." Similarly, in their investigation of American film, Quart and Auster (1991) suggest that most movies of the late twentieth century reflected the conservative "counteroffensive against five decades of the welfare state" (137). In terms of film and television representations of the American Dream of upward mobility, DeMott (1990) describes tales in which characters attempt upward mobility, but then abort the endeavor themselves. DeMott calls these "renunciations," as the characters "momentarily tempted by lofty visions of social/cultural ascent reject the temptation realizing there are no higher satisfactions than they already possess" (59–60).

The Themes of Upward Mobility in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

Three themes concerning the American Dream are communicated via contemporary Hollywood films. The first theme is the common rags-to-riches success story that deals with the realization of the American Dream by a moral protagonist. I call this theme "moralizing mobility" and elucidate it in chapter two. These narratives revolve around working-class characters who yearn for upward mobility and whose success is made possible through their admirable motives and hard work. These dramas present conflicts as personal problems of mobility for the individuals who accomplish upward mobility without surrendering the ethical superiority of their virtuous characters.

"Moralizing failure" encompasses my second theme, which is the rational reverse of successful upward mobility in which characters cope with failed mobility without questioning the basic tenets of the American Dream. These narratives, explained in chapter three, present conflict between success at any cost and the moral superiority of accepting one's materially inferior but morally superior working-class background. In these films, the working-class individuals are corrupted by the immoral motives of the desire for greater wealth or prestige. Although they fail at upward mobility, the characters experience personal conversions through which they relearn the virtue of their working-class values.

The third theme, "moralizing the material," involves narratives that focus on emotionally and/or physically distressed upper-class characters who benefit from a relationship with characters from a lower social class. I investigate these films in chapter four and find that the upper-class protagonists are often immoral or corrupt, misled, and always unhappy or depressed. Their lives are empty and meaningless despite their material wealth. Circumstances bring them into a close cross-class relationship with a struggling working-class or poor person, who redeems the upper-class character by showing him or her the way back to living a full and happy life. However, all the members of the cross-class relationship benefit, as it becomes a symbolic microcosm of the myth of a classless America.

These three themes are at the heart of any discussion concerning the American Dream and contemporary Hollywood movies. This book reveals that these narratives counsel that the American Dream is alive and well. Contemporary Hollywood films reaffirm the preeminence of the American Dream despite an ever-worsening economy that is squeezing the middle class and forcing the working class into low-paying service jobs. Thus, the films communicate a healthy and resilient American Dream despite mounting social limitations that make it impossible for most Americans to achieve social mobility.

CHAPTER 2

Moralizing Mobility

Working Girl

In Mike Nichols's 1988 film *Working Girl,* Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) and Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford) are drinking tequila in a posh Manhattan bar. In a spirited toast, Jack says "Power to the people" as he knocks back the shot. Tess, in a quiet voice, responds, "The little people," and downs her shot. By the end of this film, Tess, a secretary and one of the decent little people, unseats her immoral and unlikable boss, lands an executive position of her own, and becomes romantically involved with Jack, a Wall Street merger executive. *Working Girl* is the story of a working-class woman who achieves upward mobility. In the end, she is rewarded with mobility because she is a moral and hardworking individual. In other words, her motives are pure and demonstrated as the correct reasons for mobility; and thus she is awarded with the American Dream. Tess's moral uprightness sparks her transformation and enables her to make the moves that grant her upward mobility.

Working Girl marks class in its characters through occupations and image in a high-culture versus low-culture manner. For instance, in *Working Girl,* Tess works as a secretary and so fits into Ehrenreich's definition of working class:

> By "working-class" I mean not only industrial workers in hard hats, but all those people who are not professionals, managers, or entrepre-

> neurs; who work for wages rather than salaries; and who spend their working hours variously lifting, bending, driving, monitoring, typing, keyboarding, cleaning, providing physical care for others, loading, unloading, cooking, serving, etc. The working-class so defined makes up 60 to 70 percent of the U.S. population. (1995, 40–41)

On the other hand, Jack Trainer belongs to the "professional middle class" that makes up about 20 percent of Americans (Ehrenreich 1995, 41). Hence, Tess and Jack's relationship becomes a cross-class romance, what Ross (1998) calls a cross-class fantasy in film. It is through these occupational differences that the film defines class in a manner that is easily recognized by the audience. This view of class also fits into what Wright identifies as a processual view of class, in which social status sees "classes as constituted above all by the lived experiences of people" (1997, 492). Therefore, the audience understands Tess's class affiliation by seeing her living her daily life.

Style is an important indicator of class affiliation, and signifiers of high style and working-class fashion are often employed to visually communicate clues to the social status of characters. As Husting (1993, 17) states, "Tess and her friend . . . have all the signifiers of lower middle-class women—long, teased and sprayed hair, striking makeup, miniskirts, and Brooklyn accents. . . . Tess is the epitome of working-class Staten Island culture." Tess's working-class affiliation is apparent in working-class style. She and her friends all have big hairstyles, gaudy jewelry, and heavy makeup, which signify them as working-class (Husting 1993). Fashion, makeup, and speech are important signifiers of class in *Working Girl*; and the audience's attention is directed to them several times during the motion picture. When Tess first meets her new boss, corporate merger executive Katherine Parker (Sigourney Weaver), Katherine remarks, "as a team we have a uniform, simple, elegant, impeccable. Dress shabbily and they notice the dress. Dress impeccably and they notice the woman." Tess asks, "How do I look?" Katherine responds, "Rethink the jewelry." Soon afterwards, Tess is in the restroom removing her jewelry and toning down her makeup in an effort to imitate Katherine's upscale appearance.

Later, when Tess decides to adopt the image and style of an executive, partially through the use of Katherine's wardrobe, makeup, and office, she

asks her friend Cyn (Joan Cusack) to cut her long hair. Cyn asks if she is sure that she wants to change her hairstyle; and Tess responds positively with "If you want to be taken seriously, you need serious hair." After her outward transformation, Tess returns to her old neighborhood for Cyn's engagement party at a working-class bar. Mick, her estranged lover, sees her and remarks, "You look different, good, classy." In this way, Tess's looks first are highlighted as a sign of her working-class status and then to denote her upward mobility.

Speech patterns are other indicators of status in this film. Early on, the audience learns that Tess is taking a speech class. In contrast, her working-class friends speak in stereotypical Brooklyn accents. After Tess decides to adopt an upper-class image, she affects a high-pitched nasal voice as she pretends to be her own secretary (the working-class Tess) making a call for Ms. McGill (the executive Tess). When she switches to her executive voice, she changes to a deeper, more sophisticated and resonant tone to arrange a meeting with Jack Trainer. For executive Tess to be accepted as upper class, she must speak and dress in a manner befitting the upper class. She also needs an improvised working-class secretary to punctuate the difference. Similarly, there is a scene in Katherine's apartment where Tess listens to Katherine on a recording and then mimics Katherine's voice in an effort to perfect her upper-class speech.

Although emphasis on style is important to how Tess begins her class transformation, it is not what makes her successful. What enables Tess to succeed and, indeed, what denotes her as special are her motives and personal attributes. Tess is constantly identified with the most upright and valued motives in the American Dream: hard work, perseverance, and moral uprightness. She is an exemplar of the American Dream. For example, Tess is introduced after a long opening sequence that features the Statue of Liberty and Carly Simon's Academy Award–winning song "Let the River Run." Accompanying the Statue of Liberty with the song serves as an inspiring backdrop to Tess's desire for upward mobility and her moral uprightness. The Statue of Liberty is an icon of American classless opportunity, and the audience is easily able to associate her with the American Dream through this iconic connection. To further the point, Tess then rides the ferry from working-class New Jersey to upper-

class Manhattan. This journey is a cinematic representation of Tess's crossing from one life to a better one.

The audience learns that Tess is working very hard to achieve upward mobility in the form of a better job, but her aspirations are more than just dreams of success. Tess is driven emotionally to better herself. She worked hard to put herself through night school with honors and constantly works to improve herself through classes and self-help literature. Yet, despite this effort, Tess is troubled that she has, so far, been unable to succeed because she cannot find acceptance in the business world due to her working-class background. Tess feels that she cannot be taken seriously by Wall Street executives because she does not have the right pedigree. In fact, Tess has tried to improve her status but has failed to achieve the rewards promised by the American Dream. Her position as a working-class woman prohibits her from attaining the business and social positions to which she aspires. Tess sees her working-class style as preventing her from getting the job that she wants and is qualified to perform. Tess sees the rules of the game putting her out of bounds; hence, style and image must become the way she gains access to the upper-class strata. Unfortunately, the film does not choose to highlight this sort of class and business snobbery as a significant social problem or as an unethical business practice. The rhetoric of this film does not lie in offering a social answer to a social problem. Instead, the problem becomes an individual conflict. Tess's problems are manifested in her female adversary Katherine rather than in an unfair social or business structure. In other words, the motion picture does not address the situation in which Tess's upward mobility is thwarted by social inequalities and gender biases, a situation that is all too real and certainly in direct contradiction to the American Dream as epitomized by the Statue of Liberty (even with its restoration).

Tess decides that to gain entry to the upper class, she must appropriate an upper-class image and style. She does this because she believes others are successful due to their style and fashion. Tess is, by her own admission, trying to better her life. In a heated argument, Tess lays out her feelings to Cyn. Cyn gives a nod to the classic Cinderella story as she asks if Tess thinks that Jack is going to rescue her from her working-class life. Cyn says, "You know you're gonna get your heart stomped. Why

don't you act smart? You've already lost your man [Mick] and your house [Mick's home]. You're screwing up your life!" Tess rejects Cyn's appraisal with "I'm trying to make [my life] better. I'm not gonna spend the rest of my life working my ass off and getting nowhere just because I followed rules I had nothing to do with setting up!"

In this way, Tess reveals her reasons for upward mobility. She is not shallow and superficial like many she has encountered who put an undue amount of significance on a person's appearance or style. Tess realizes, and demonstrates to the audience, that anyone can adopt this superficial measure of a person's worth and, therefore, debunks its pretentious airs. Her relative ease in adopting a highbrow taste culture is a comment on its unimportance in determining a person's worth. Thus, *Working Girl* and most of the films I address in this chapter debunk the upper-class lifestyle and show it as nothing more than the tool of condescending snobs who make unfair distinctions about people based on whether they shop on Fifth Avenue or at a discount department store. Tess proves that she can easily adopt the upper-class style without changing her true self. Despite her fashion makeover, Tess remains a hard-working, morally upright individual.

Working Girl is not just about image and style. It is a film about what is right with Tess and what is wrong with her upper-class female adversary, Katherine. At first, things begin to look up for Tess when she gets a new job and a new supervisor. Katherine, her boss, obviously has the background and credentials to be taken seriously in the high-finance business community. Katherine tells Tess that they are a team, and she wants Tess to bring her good ideas. Tess does this when she works out a deal that will benefit Trask industries by providing a lucrative radio media merger that will save Trask from a hostile takeover by a Japanese interest. However, after hearing Tess's idea, Katherine tells Tess that Trask was not interested. But fate smiles on Tess after Katherine is hospitalized by a skiing accident. As Tess tends to some of Katherine's personal matters, she learns that Katherine has stolen her idea and used it without acknowledging Tess. The unethical act puts Katherine in the adversarial position. The scene that sets up the conflict between these two women also marks Tess's decision to break with her old life.

As Tess enters Katherine's lavish home for the first time, Simon's musical anthem to fairness, "Let the River Run," rises up non-diegetically. Tess moves about the home and plays Katherine's personal mini tape recorder. On it, Tess hears a personal reminder from Katherine to herself that tells Tess that Katherine is planning to profit from Tess's idea by taking it to corporate merger broker Jack Trainer and claiming it as her own. Tess realizes that she has been fooled and despondently returns to her working-class neighborhood, only to find her boyfriend Mick having sex with another woman. This final betrayal forces Tess to make a decision about enacting a change in her life. The scene cuts to Tess pensively staring across the water at the Manhattan skyline; and in a fast-moving tracking shot, the audience is spirited there dramatically.

This segment suggests Tess has made an important decision. The film visually breaks Tess away from her old neighborhood and life and situates her in Katherine's office, looking back across the water at her old place in society. Tess is dressed in a conservative suit and has adopted the style of a merger executive. She sets up her own meeting with Jack Trainer and begins her bid for upward mobility.

Tess finally manages upward mobility through education, hard work, perseverance, and the adoption of Katherine's upper-class style. Tess's positive qualities demonstrate her moral substance. Her one questionable act is pretending to be an executive, but that is easily forgiven because she resorts to this ploy when she is forced to it by Katherine's unethical actions. When the day for the merger meeting arrives, Tess enters the boardroom where Jack and the other corporate men involved in the deal are waiting. She sits, the lone woman, at a round table with twelve men in a room that is decorated in a masculine style. The room is adorned in dusky, muted colors, leather high-back chairs, and dark wood paneling. Tess stands out as feminine in this bastion of male power. Trask begins the meeting by explaining how Tess has shown them the answer to their problems and uses a story about a clever little girl to punctuate his opening address. This scene visually highlights the patriarchy of the traditional merger brokers, as only Tess seems nervous and out of place. Her nervousness makes her emotionally vulnerable and

unable to defend herself when Katherine enters the meeting unexpectedly and accuses Tess of stealing her ideas.

Katherine barges into the meeting on crutches, shouting, "This woman is my secretary." Tess is visually shaken and frightened. Jack asks if the accusation is true; and from Tess's response he remarks, "Jesus, you are her secretary." Tess is on the defensive and rattled; she looks at Jack and realizes he will not aid her in this fight. Katherine presses the attack by loudly accusing her of stealing the idea for the merger. Tess counters by calling Katherine a liar. Trask, playing the patriarch, takes control and stops their exchange. Tess is agitated, trembling, frightened; she feels out of place and besieged on all sides. She says quietly, "I know you don't believe me," as she apologizes and leaves.

When her disguise is uncovered, Tess is forced to retreat and face her failure; but fate has not given up on Tess. Her moral substance has carried her to the position that she has earned through the basic aspects of the American Dream; and accordingly, she will achieve her goal. Tess has proven herself to Jack and Mr. Trask; but her adversary, Katherine, has foiled her triumph. In order to bring the film to its proper resolution, Tess must defeat Katherine and expose her as an immoral character. She accomplishes this at a chance meeting at the elevators in the business office high-rise.

The scene cuts to Tess once again framed with the Statue of Liberty as her theme, "Let the River Run," plays non-diegetically—only this time, Tess is traveling back from Manhattan, beaten. Her adversary defeated her, and she is hurt by her loss. Later, she goes back to Katherine's office to retrieve her belongings. On the way out of the building, a passerby knocks the box out of her hands; and she must pause by the elevator to recollect her things. Fortuitously, Jack, Trask, and Katherine are on the way to Katherine's office. Jack begins to help Tess and asks, "Was me and you just part of the scheme too?" Tess responds, "No, look, if I'd told you I was just a secretary you wouldn't have taken the meeting [with me]—I mean, who is fooling who here?" Tess, now outside the boardroom, has found her strength again and is ready to make her stand.

Trask orders Jack into the elevator, but Jack refuses by saying that he will not go up without Tess because she "put the deal together and we

shouldn't proceed without her." But Trask is not sold until Tess plays her trump by telling Trask that his merger is in danger of going sour. This gets Trask off the elevator; and he, Jack, and Tess all ride up together, without Katherine. On the way up, Tess explains that the star of the radio stations with which Trask plans to merge is considering a new job, which would severely reduce the value of the stations. Once the elevator reaches the top, Trask confronts Katherine, asking her to explain the deal. Katherine is unable to explain the details of the merger because Jack and Tess had actually worked them out. Katherine realizes that she has been trapped and asks Jack to explain the details to Trask. This time, Jack leaves Katherine without aid because he wants Trask to realize that Katherine has plagiarized Tess's proposal. When Katherine has no answer of her own, Trask realizes that Katherine has stolen Tess's idea and swears that he will have Katherine fired. Tess explains to them what the audience already understands: because of her lowly secretarial job, she would have been unable to get anyone to listen to her and could not gain access to them "without bending the rules." Trask is so impressed that he gives Tess a job, and so she achieves upward mobility. Tess's hard work, initiative, and education have paid off and fulfilled the promise of the American Dream.

It is significant that Tess's antagonist, Katherine, is a successful woman, and that men eventually come to Tess's aid and clear the obstructions for her to realize the upward mobility that she has earned. This situation allows the plot to sidestep the issue of social inequality and unethical business practices related to class snobbery and gender bias and to focus on the conflict between two women in the workplace, Tess, the good-hearted working girl, and Katherine, the high-society and power-hungry virago. Thus, a woman rather than a sexist work environment keeps Tess down.

Further, the traditional agents of patriarchy intercede on Tess's behalf to legitimate her class move and defeat her female rival. This depiction occurs despite the fact that one of the largest causes of economic inequality in America is the wage gap between men and women (National Committee on Pay Equality, 1992). Thus, the film is solidly in line with the patriarchy, which is in control as these women fight.

Further, the movie takes several opportunities to gratuitously show both Katherine and Tess scantily clad in lingerie. In fact, one telling scene has Tess vacuuming in a teddy and high heels. This sort of voyeuristic sport further entrenches the film in the patriarchy and deflects attention from the serious issues the film raises concerning gender and class bias.

But Tess does not seem concerned about these issues. She has achieved her goal, and she is happy. It is time for Tess to receive her award as promised by the American Dream. In the last scene, Tess has her own office, secretary, and upscale lover, Jack Trainer. Tess made the transition that she desperately desired. As Tess greets her new secretary, she is humble and friendly; and as Tess explains her view of their relationship, she does so in a way that is fair, moral, and egalitarian. Tess has usurped Katherine's immoral position and has replaced her as a moral boss. The audience believes that Tess will treat her working-class assistant fairly. This is in contrast to Katherine's similar speech to Tess early in the film. Katherine represents the immoral upper class and proves this through her treachery. In spite of the fact that she is immoral and knows it, she insists on maintaining the appearance of a trustworthy and helpful boss, as demonstrated by her "we're a team" speech. Tess is clearly shown as the morally superior character and is rewarded with the job and the man she desires (whom she just happens to win away from Katherine). Tess's realization of her dream is made even better by the fact that she has found a wonderful romantic relationship with a man who is depicted as much better than Tess's old working-class boyfriend, Mick.

Tess's personal qualities and good character make her worthy of upward mobility; and, therefore, she is rewarded. Concomitantly, her values are offered as a prescription for those who would pursue the American Dream. Fisher explains that the American Dream itself is really two myths, "the rags to riches, materialistic myth of individual success and the egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood" (1973, 161). These two American Dream myths compete both within individuals and on a larger social scale:

> The materialistic myth is grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, "playing the game," initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success. . . . The moralistic myth is well

> expressed in the basic tenants of the Declaration of Independence. . . . These tenets naturally involve the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for dignity and worth of each and every individual. (1973, 161)

As Fisher further explains, "the materialistic myth involves a concept of freedom that emphasizes the freedom to do as one pleases" (162). If the myth of a classless America must be adhered to when discussing issues of upward mobility, then Fisher's materialistic myth is foregrounded because a classless society would offer no structural limitations that would hinder individuals to do as they please. In films that use the Cinderella formula, the competing myths of a classless America and the American Dream of upward mobility converge in Fisher's materialistic myth. Fisher's egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood is downplayed, as the triumph of the protagonist over the antagonist is an issue of social order, not social integration (e.g., brotherhood). Yet, these films do not negate morality. As Fisher points out, the materialistic myth requires a value system related to the Puritan work ethic. These films use this value system to moralize upward mobility. In other words, the materialistic myth of upward mobility is attainable only by moral protagonists. Therefore, *Working Girl* explicates how a person of moral substance is able to achieve the American Dream.

Working Girl is an exemplar of films about upward mobility in contemporary mainstream Hollywood cinema. The movie's cast is composed of solid box-office favorites, including Harrison Ford, Melanie Griffith, Sigourney Weaver, and Alec Baldwin. It was nominated for at least five Academy Awards and received the Oscar for best song, "Let the River Run." Moreover, it won four top Golden Globe awards, including best comedy/musical motion picture. The film performed well at the box office and received critical acclaim (e.g., Ebert 1988). It remains highly recommended by respected movie guides (e.g., Connors and Craddock 1998), and the *New York Times* considers it one of the best one thousand movies ever made (Nichols 1999). As a result, the film is still widely seen on network, cable, premium cable, satellite, and local broadcast stations throughout the nation. All of this is to say that *Working Girl* has communicated and continues to communicate its message to a large audience

and is respected by both fans and critics. In addition, the movie illustrates two important class observations. First, the motion picture and its audience are keenly aware of the class status of the characters. Second, the goal of the working-class person is upward mobility as a way of attaining a better life. *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) also elucidates these two important observations concerning class in film, but deals with a protagonist who at first does not embrace the moralistic aspects of the American Dream.

An Officer and a Gentleman

Director Taylor Hackford's *An Officer and a Gentleman* presents the audience with a young man, Zack Mayo (Richard Gere), who attempts to change his life for the better. However, unlike Tess, Zack is presented as a troubled person trying desperately to find a better place for himself in the world. Zack's mother committed suicide before he turned thirteen; and his alcoholic father, a sailor in the Navy, spent most of his time at sea and the rest of it in bars and brothels. Zack blames himself for his mom's death and has an intense ambivalence toward his dad, Byron Mayo (Robert Loggia). Byron has no interest in Zack; and when forced to raise him after his wife's suicide, he simply treated the boy like a shipmate and refused to give him any of "that fatherly bullshit," as Mayo calls it. They live above a filthy brothel in the Philippines where Zack is alone for three weeks of each month. Disregarded by his father and beaten up by the local boys, Zack becomes a troubled loner who learns to be selfish while emotionally torturing himself for his mother's suicide. Eventually, Byron and Zack return stateside, where Zack goes to college, after which he decides he wants to fulfill his boyhood dream of becoming a Navy fighter pilot, his version of the American Dream. During his training, he meets Paula Pokrifki (Debra Winger), a blue-collar factory worker; and they develop a steamy sexual affair that grows to a loving relationship.

Military hierarchy complicates the class markers in this motion picture, but they nonetheless are similar to the class signifiers in *Working Girl*. Zack is not a typical working-class character. He is the son of a Navy sailor, which places Byron under the officer corps in military

terms—a status somewhat analogous to working class, but those markers do not fit well in terms of rigid military rank. Byron and Zack's home life, if it can be called a home, is spent in the poor, rundown, and often dangerous parts of a Philippine, red-light district. Zack, unlike many children of military parents, does not live in base housing, which often approximates suburban America. Instead, his environs are those of an economically disadvantaged person. Further, Byron's alcoholism and poor parenting skills situate him within some common working-class male stereotypes (Ehrenreich 1995). These conditions reinforce Zack's working-class affiliation. Moreover, Zack also carries the markers of the working class, as his longer hair, tattoo, and motorcycle visually link him to a stereotypical working-class male appearance. Thus, just as big hair and heavy makeup signified Tess as working class, so long hair and tattoos communicate Zack's class affiliation.

This point is furthered by the movie's plot. When Zack tells Byron that he is entering officer training school, Byron responds with "Christ, look at yourself, officers don't have tattoos. I don't want to see you do something that you are going to regret. [Officers are] the most uptight assholes God ever put on earth. Officers aren't like us." Byron suggests that Zack is not officer material. This interaction is similar to Cyn's warning to Tess in *Working Girl* that she is going to ruin her life by attempting to make a dramatic change. Zack is sure that Byron is right about the tattoo, so he uses a large bandage to cover up the American eagle tattoo on his right arm. Further, Zack believes that he and his father are socially beneath the officers and their families. This is complicated by levels of income, as Zack sees himself as poor in relation to the officers' families. This is demonstrated when he is talking to fellow trainee and friend, Sid, in a bar. There Zack remarks that Sid must be rich because he is the son of an officer rather than an enlisted man like Byron.

Officers are presented as well-dressed, clean-cut, and clean-living individuals, while Byron and Zack's life is dirty and cheap. Byron and Zack's living conditions and appearance coupled with the military hierarchy place Byron in a subordinate position to officers and communicate a type of working-class affiliation for these two men. The audience

understands that, like Tess in *Working Girl*, Zack must change the way he looks and behaves to achieve his dream.

An officer trainee is required to begin to adopt the look and manner of an officer, and the importance of becoming an officer and a gentleman is highlighted. In other words, Zack and the other trainees are, in fact, being instructed to behave like officers and gentlemen as well as being physically trained and intellectually schooled to become aviators. Not only do officers have higher ranks, better salaries, and more responsibility; but the term "gentlemen" carries certain behavioral expectations that have long been considered contrary to working-class standards. This move away from his life with Byron and toward the life of an officer and gentleman is part of Zack's dream of bettering himself by achieving his American Dream; hence, this is a story of upward mobility.

Another significant non-officer in this film, Drill Instructor (DI) Emil Foley (Louis Gossett Jr.), evaluates the trainees' performance. Foley is a gunnery sergeant, a position that is respected in the enlisted ranks, but is subordinate to officers. In fact, Foley's position as DI means that he trains officer candidates who, upon successful completion of their training, outrank him and become his superiors; however, he exerts control over them and makes their lives difficult by challenging them to excel. Foley is the perfectly groomed epitome of a lead-by-example drill instructor who takes seriously his responsibility to train Zack to be both an officer and a gentleman. Foley is at first identified as Zack's adversary, the person who will be responsible for ruining Zack's bid for his dream. His tone and behavior are designed to demean and intimidate the trainees, and Zack soon becomes a favorite target of Foley's wrath.

As the film progresses, Foley and Paula become the two most positive people in Zack's life in terms of his ability to transcend his humble place and achieve his dream. Foley and Paula are the working-class characters who possess the personal moral substance that helps turn Zack away from his immoral ways and enables him to develop so that he will be rewarded with his dream of upward mobility.

However, in the beginning, Zack does not display the type of moral resolve that Tess demonstrates in *Working Girl*. Zack certainly works physically hard at his training—and hard work is part of the American

Dream—but the film highlights Zack's moral shortcomings. For example, Zack does not morally accept his training. He does not attempt to build his character or commit to being part of the team. Instead, Zack is a loner who does not regard his classmates as worthy of his time or help. He consistently refuses to be part of the team and looks out only for his own selfish interest.

One very important off-base encounter presents the viewer with more class markers and another example of Zack's unworthiness. The bar where Zack and Sid meet Paula and Lynette carries the signifiers of a working-class establishment with its pool tables and country music. The men who frequent the bar are visually distinguished by their long hair, flannel shirts, and jeans, in contrast to Zack and Sid in their naval uniforms. The local men resent Zack and Sid's presence in their bar and Zack's and Sid's dating of the local women. In a stereotypical working-class male demonstration of macho behavior, the local men call Sid and Zack "rich college boys" and "sailor boys" and start a fight. During the course of the fight, Zack uses the martial arts he learned on the tough streets of Asia to break a man's nose.

Afterwards in a motel room, Zack becomes verbally abusive to Paula; and she points out that he is unfit to achieve his dream: "You got no manners. You treat women like whores. You got no chance at being no officer." Soon after, Zack ditches Paula and tells her, "[A]nother class [of trainees] is coming soon, and you and Lynette will be right back in business. I don't want you to love me." In this emotional scene, Zack accuses Paula of wanting to use him to escape her working-class life. Zack thinks nothing of hurting Paula with his unsubstantiated claims, and his remarks are designed to emotionally wound her. He is not behaving in a gentlemanly way and is proving, with his rude behavior, Paula's assessment of his unfitness to be an officer.

These examples show that Zack is neither an officer nor a gentleman and that he does not possess the moral substance to become either. But in terms of achieving his dream of being a Navy fighter pilot, Zack's worst shortcoming is that he refuses to be part of a team. Zack rejects the camaraderie and esprit de corps that are an essential part of being a productive member of a military group. It becomes obvious to Foley that

Zack's self-centered interests exempt him from consideration for successful completion of the program because Zack could never be trusted to be responsible for other people's lives. Therefore, Foley decides that he must make Zack quit the training program, known as Drop on Request (DOR), by physically breaking Zack. Foley tells Zack, "[L]ife has dealt you some shitty cards. That's why you don't mesh [with the other officer candidates]. You know all these boys and girls are better than you." But after Foley realizes that he can't force Zack to DOR, he decides that he will have Zack kicked out of the program and tells Zack so. But Zack pleads with Foley, "I got no place else to go. I got nothing else." This is Zack's conversion scene; here, he is broken emotionally and physically and afterwards can be remade into a person of strong moral substance. This scene gives Foley hope that Zack may be redeemable, and Foley relents and allows Zack to remain in training. After this scene, Zack's change is manifested in his behavior; and it becomes obvious that Zack is a new person with a strong moral character.

Foley and Zack are only half of this tale of transformation; the other half is Zack and Paula. The plot does not provide many views of Paula's life sans Zack, but she is a blue-collar factory worker and working-class woman. She is the illegitimate daughter of an officer candidate who abandoned her mother, Esther, when his training ended. Her mother married Joe, a man to whom she did not love, in order to provide for her daughter. Joe and Esther have three girls and live in a small house. When Zack comes over for dinner one night, they all eat at the kitchen table. When the viewer first sees Paula, she is at work at the National Paper plant at one of the massive and deafeningly noisy machines that she tends for an hourly wage. Both of these scenes visually reinforce her working-class affiliation.

The working-class and poor women of the Puget Sound are depicted as gold diggers who seduce Navy men to escape their economically deprived lives and become the wives of Navy officers. Foley calls Paula, her best friend Lynette (Lisa Blount), and the other single working women civilians of the Puget Sound "Puget Debs." Foley believes that the women are not good company for his men because they want to marry Navy men as a way of leaving their working-class lives forever. Foley

warns his trainees, "Poor girls come across the Sound every weekend with one thing in mind: to marry themselves an aviator. You are the answer to their dreams."

Zack may indeed be Paula's dream; but it is because she cares for him, not because she sees him as a means of escape from her working-class life. Paula fears ending up like her mother. She tells Zack, "My mom still works at that factory and every time I look at her I know what I don't want." But Paula is not interested in making Zack marry her. Paula is shown on several occasions as someone who enjoys having a good time and is deeply in love with Zack. Lynette, in contrast, is characterized as a woman who is mercilessly in search of a way out of her working-class life and sees marrying one of the trainees as her best opportunity. Lynette lives in a rundown house on the outskirts of town. In contrast to Paula's neat, working-class environs, Lynette's place is a ramshackle shack. Foley warns his trainees that the main way that the women "trap" a cadet is by faking a pregnancy. Indeed, Lynette uses this ploy to force Sid to marry her. Lynette is considering this act when she asks Paula about "trapping" Zack. Lynette says, "Just how far would you go to [marry] Zack? Would you let yourself get pregnant?" Paula responds disapprovingly, "[That's] real backward." Lynette retorts, "What's backward is the way they treat us. Then ditch us like we were trash." Later, Lynette accuses Paula of also trying to "trap" Zack. She says, "You're no different than I am, Paula." But Paula responds with "Yes, I am." After this exchange, the film goes to some lengths to demonstrate that Paula is not a gold digger. Paula is a hardworking and ethical person throughout the film and is Zack's lover and nurturer. In fact, after he completes training, Zack tells Paula, "I want to thank you. I couldn't have made it [through training] without you."

In contrast, Lynette tells Sid that she is pregnant; and he eventually realizes that he loves her and voluntarily leaves his training so that they can be married immediately. When Sid tells Lynette his plans, she explains that she is not pregnant and that she does not want to marry him if he is not going to be a Navy aviator. She tells him, "I want to marry a pilot. [I want to be] the wife of an aviator." Emotionally hurt and dejected, Sid commits suicide. Sid's death is ironic as his original

plans were to sexually exploit Lynette and abandon her at the end of his training.

Sid's death is a tragic outcome, but this film is not a tragedy. It's a love story and a tale of upward mobility. Therefore, once Zack understands that Foley's lessons are prescriptions for the proper morals that he needs to develop, Zack is able to complete the training; in the process, he becomes an unselfish team player. In an emotionally moving scene, after Zack completes his training, he goes to Foley, tells Foley that he will always remember him, and then salutes Foley in a display of respect.

Paula heals the rest of Zack's problems. He learns that he really does love Paula and goes to the National Paper factory in his officer uniform, an indicator of his new Navy aviator officer status, and sweeps Paula into his arms and carries her out to the cheers and applause of the other working women and to the non-diegetic music of the Academy Award–winning Best Song, "Up Where We Belong," a fitting anthem for the two people who will now be lifted up socially.

The lyrics of this song state, "Love lift us up where we belong, where the eagles cry on a mountain high, far from the world below, up where the clear winds blow." Perhaps this is the intended message of this film, that it is true love that lifts up Zack and Paula and grants them their dreams. Zack becomes an officer and a gentleman, and Paula achieves her dream of true love. Foley, the working-class sergeant, shows Zack that honor is not in the uniform of an officer, but in the conduct and character of the person, and transforms Zack from troubled loner to an emotionally healthy and ethical person.

An Officer and a Gentleman and *Working Girl* present conflicts as personal problems of upward mobility (the American Dream) for the characters: the films' morality demonstrates how the characters can achieve a better life. In *An Officer and a Gentleman*, Foley and Paula demonstrate the moral high ground of the working class and the proper motives: true love, hard work, perseverance, and selflessness. But more significantly, the motion picture shows the fate of those who do not approach their dreams with the proper motives. Sid, Lynette, and Zack before his redemption demonstrate the improper and unethical natures that revolve around exploitation, manipulation, and self-centered motives.

These immoral behaviors are cinematically punished with failure. The film prescribes the proper motives as it shows that once Zack redeems his motives, he can then achieve his version of the American Dream and find true love with Paula as they both move up to where they belong. A year later, Hollywood once again evoked the American Dream in another very popular film. *Flashdance*, like *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Working Girl*, demonstrates the successful combination of moral values and hard work as the ticket to a better life.

Flashdance

Adrian Lyne's 1983 film *Flashdance* offers a more traditional Cinderella theme than *An Officer and a Gentleman*. *Flashdance*'s protagonist, Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals), achieves both her dream of joining the elite cultured world of ballet, an upward transformation for her, and true love with her own Prince Charming, Nick Hurlye (Michael Nouri). This film's focus on the working class makes it important to my study; for as Steven points out, *Flashdance*, along with *Rocky*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Country*, "marked a renewal of Hollywood's interest in working-class characters and settings" (1985, 33).

The locations in which Alex is placed visually represent the Hollywood version of a working-class steel town. Alex is a welder in Pittsburgh. Her worksite is a maze of steel and men locked in the pursuit of manufacturing and surrounded by massive structures and fiery blasts. The colors are muted grays and browns, dark and foreboding; and there is a noticeable absence of things natural or traditionally considered feminine, as this world literally seems made for and by men. Mawby's Bar, the local pub where Alex dances, is a trite filmic convention of a working-man's (specifically male-gendered) bar in a working-class neighborhood except, that is, for the rather upscale runway where Alex and her female colleagues dance for the visual enjoyment of the mostly male patrons. In so doing, "Alex substantiates the myth that women are made to be looked at and that men do the looking" (Jordan 1996, 121).

When we first see Alex in Mawby's, she is dancing to the song "He's a Dream"; and the camera shows us that two men are watching her. They

are her immediate welding supervisor and Nick, the owner of the company where she works. Nick is obviously interested in Alex for her beauty and wants to find out more about her. Alex's supervisor gives him the number 174-63-1503 and says, "It's her Social Security number, asshole, she works for you." Thus, early on, the film establishes Alex's subordinate position to Nick as her employer while the soundtrack also insists that he is the dream she will realize.

Alex's dream of upward mobility does not involve getting the job and man she deserves like Tess in *Working Girl*, or finding true love and a moral center like Zack in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Instead, Alex wants the artistically elite and culturally refined life of a ballerina. She wishes to transcend not only the wage labor of welding and her dancing job at Mawby's Bar, but her entire working-class life. She dreams of joining the cultural aristocracy as a ballet dancer and has focused her life on attaining that dream. In *Working Girl*, professional style and image are the high-class trademarks but in *Flashdance*, the refined and sophisticated arts denote the upper-class taste culture.

Much like Tess in *Working Girl*, Alex has engaged her energy and resources in attaining her dream. Although Alex is still a young woman, having just graduated from high school, she is shown as a mature and focused person who is a hardworking and accomplished welder by day and a dedicated dancer at night. When she is not welding or dancing at Mawby's, she practices her craft in a never-ending drive to perfect her talent and achieve her dream. Also like Tess, Alex struggles to take the ultimate step toward achieving her goal because she finds the elite world of dance both captivating and frightening. When Alex goes to the elite dance school, she cannot muster the courage to ask for an application. Yet the resolution of the film brings Alex her dream of ballet dancing, social mobility, and romantic love.

Alex's dream is more than just a young person's aspiration to be a famous dancer. Like Tess and Zack, Alex's longing to transcend her current state is shown as an all-encompassing desire to make her life better. As she confesses to her priest, "I want to make something out of my life but sometimes I think it's just not gonna happen." In *Flashdance*, Alex attains her dream through hard work, perseverance, and sacrifice. As we

have seen before, these are Hollywood's familiar prescriptions for the successful achievement of the American Dream.

Flashdance provides Alex with a working-class family and peer group that are both loving and nurturing, and Alex's aspirations and commitment to achieving her goals are compared and contrasted with similar hopes and dreams among her friends. Where they fail, Alex succeeds and becomes a hero to all. Yet it is significant that in all of the films that I address in this chapter, the characters achieve upward mobility but leave their working-class families and peers behind. This is understandable in films like *An Officer and a Gentleman*, where Zack's peers and family are unsupportive; but in *Flashdance*, this is not the case. Alex's working-class peer group is populated by caring individuals who place family and friends in a position of importance. Even the owner of Mawby's Bar is a stereotypically gruff but lovable man who talks tough but provides a safe place of employment for Alex when compared to the nude dancing bar down the street.

Further, Alex's mentor, Hannah, is portrayed as an immigrant who has done all that she can to help Alex attain her dream by exposing Alex to the socially elite world of dance and even sewing her an appropriate evening gown to wear to the ballet. Additionally, Alex speaks fondly of her deceased father as a man who taught her to appreciate classical music. Likewise, Alex and her friends Richie and Jeanie make up a support network that is nurturing and offers a safe place to fail. Even Jeanie's dad is shown as a tough-love working-class father who becomes a tender and sympathetic figure when Jeanie's dreams of joining the Ice Capades are ruined as she falls during a tryout. It is not clear why anyone would want to leave this group of caring individuals, but it is a key element of the Hollywood American Dream that the hero move up socially and away from his or her working-class life.

Both of Alex's closest friends, Richie and Jeanie, fail to achieve their dreams and return disillusioned to their working-class life. However, their failure is not so much a result of poor moral substance but reflect a lack of resolve. In other words, the film suggests that they do not work hard enough to achieve their goals. Their efforts are shown as lacking, as Jeanie puts it, "all that time and practice—a waste," thus suggesting that

she will admit and accept defeat. In fact, Jeanie's reaction to her failure is a brief slide into relative moral bankruptcy as she turns to dancing at a topless bar in her neighborhood. However, Alex is shown as unwavering in her pursuit of her dream.

Nick is an interesting contrast to Alex as he has already achieved upward mobility through hard work and dedication. In fact, Nick comes from the same neighborhood as Alex but, since he is at least twenty years her senior, Alex does not recognize Nick as an old neighborhood resident. She only recognizes him by his signature on her paycheck. So far, true love has escaped Nick, as his first marriage failed. This failure resulted, at least partially, because Nick married his first wife for the wrong reasons. He admits to Alex that he married his first wife, a member of the upper class, because he believed she would help him with his own pursuit of upward mobility. As Nick describes her to Alex, "she was well educated [and] came from a real good family," thus implying that marrying her would reflect favorably on him and help to legitimize his attempt to move up socially. But the budding romance with Alex seems more appropriate, as Nick and Alex are shown to be truly in love.

Nick is central to Alex's successfully realizing her dream. Despite her hard work and years of planning and training and the fact that she is able to succeed as both a welder and a dancer, that she has been surrounded by a loving and supportive group her entire life, that she finds solace in her religious beliefs and has confidence in her own abilities, and that she is a "moral" candidate, Alex cannot muster the courage to apply to the elite dance school. She is troubled by fears of failure and a mindset that encourages her to believe that she is not good enough to gain entrance into the upper-class school. The only way Alex is able to overcome this situation is through Nick's help. Nick secretly assists Alex by contacting his friend on the Arts Council. When asking for the favor, Nick explains, "I need a favor for a special friend." That favor is to grant Alex a highly competitive audition at the ballet school that Alex dreams of attending, the same school that has intimidated her so much that she has been unable to even ask the receptionist for an application.

Initially, Alex rejects Nick when she realizes that he has used his social position to secure her the audition. "I don't want your help," she yells.

This is in keeping with Alex's determination to succeed through hard work. But eventually, Alex accepts Nick's aid by going to the audition that he has arranged. Although Alex's reasons for finally accepting Nick's help are never overtly explained, it seems that Nick's argument that he got her an audition but that it will be her hard work that will gain her acceptance to the school seems at least partially responsible for her finally accepting his help.

Does accepting Nick's help demonstrate a lapse in integrity on Alex's part? It does not, and the audience overlooks this in the same way they ignore Tess's imposter act in *Working Girl.* As Nick argues, his help merely makes it possible for Alex to demonstrate her worthiness to the cultural snobs who would unfairly keep her from an audition had he not intervened. So Alex goes through with the audition and wows the stuffy panel. She has obtained her goal through hard work and moral integrity and in the end is rewarded with her version of the American Dream.

Alex's hard work and moral integrity grant her the American Dream in the form of a coveted spot in a prestigious dance school, a place from which most working-class dancers are excluded. Alex's commitment to her dream is contrasted with her peers, who are not of low character but who do not embody the perseverance required by Hollywood's version of the American Dream. Further, Alex and Nick's love is shown as the right type of love and the ultimate example of how two working-class people can have it all if they are willing to work hard and sacrifice for their dreams. Alex's personal qualities make her worthy of upward mobility. Her endless hard work, practice, and devotion to perfecting her dance are implicit statements about the cultural values concerning upward mobility. Jeanie and Richie fail at their attempts at upward mobility because they lack the inner fortitude to overcome their failure and drive on to success. Alex, on the other hand, conquers her trepidations and vanquishes the admissions panel by winning them over through her energetic and talented ability, thus demonstrating that she achieves her goal via personal courage and hard work, whereas the others fail because they succumb to their fears. Therefore, *Flashdance*, like *Working Girl* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*, communicates that the

American Dream is attainable by moral individuals willing to work hard and persevere through hardships. In 1977, *Saturday Night Fever* offered a slightly different view of upward mobility by concentrating on personal growth instead of material success or true love (Biskind and Ehrenreich 1987; Jordan 1996).

Saturday Night Fever

Saturday Night Fever is important because this movie, along with others, indicated a renewed interest by Hollywood filmmakers in the working class (Steven 1985). Tony Manero (John Travolta) is a working-class Brooklyn teenager who feels that the only place he is able to succeed is on the local disco's dance floor. Although being the most favored dancer at the club gives Tony pride, he is a young man searching for a better life. He struggles to explain his feelings to his friend Stephanie (Karen Lynn Gorney) by telling her that he loves the feeling of success on the dance floor, but that "I would like to get that high someplace else in my life." *Saturday Night Fever* does not explicitly show Tony succeeding in an upward mobility quest; however, it does show that once he has purged himself of immorality, he is poised to make a successful move up in social status. This motion picture pushes the question of class morality further than the other films discussed in this chapter because it offers a critique of the excesses of all the classes.

Saturday Night Fever diverges from the other films because Tony and Stephanie's relationship is not romantic. Instead, they become friends, dedicated to helping one another achieve their goals of upward mobility through personal growth. When Stephanie is introduced, it is obvious that she is purposefully trying to achieve upward mobility. She has moved across the bridge to Manhattan and is working in the Big Apple. She tells Tony, "I'm out of the scene [working-class Brooklyn] altogether. I'm changing. I'm really changing as a person. I'm growing." Since Tony is struggling desperately with his own identity, he has trouble listening to Stephanie talk about her life in Manhattan because it frustrates him. Stephanie accuses him of not wanting to listen: "You can't handle hearing about a life that is so totally different than yours." Tony replies, "You

mean better don't ya?" Stephanie answers honestly, "Yeah, I mean better. Sure it's better."

Tony is romantically interested in Stephanie; but because she is a great dancer, he also needs her to be his dance partner in an upcoming contest. Stephanie agrees but tells Tony that they can never be involved romantically because he is working class: "You're a cliché. You're nowhere [and] on your way to no place." This reinforces Tony's fears about his life and exacerbates his self-doubt. Stephanie sees working-class life as a dead end and believes the upper-class Manhattan life is better. Likewise, Tony is disillusioned with his life. Jordan (1996) explains that Tony's opportunities for upward mobility are limited materially, but he can achieve them through personal growth.

As with the other films in this chapter, style and image are centrally important to Tony and Stephanie. A great deal of time is spent focusing on Tony's preoccupation with his appearance. He carefully fixes his hair and is preoccupied with fashion. Likewise, Stephanie is also very conscious of image and constantly talks about the people, restaurants, and diversions of the upper class. She works diligently to absorb and adopt their behaviors and tastes. She feels that she must live in Manhattan because getting across the bridge is moving up and away from her working-class neighborhood, just as the ferry crossing was significant for Tess in *Working Girl*. This is her preferred brand of upward mobility, and she conveys it to Tony. Tony, in turn, adopts it. At the end of the movie, he swears that he will never return to Brooklyn but will stay in Manhattan and make something of himself.

Like *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Saturday Night Fever* does not offer more than glimpses of the upper class that are the focus of Stephanie and Tony's interest. However, the critique of style over substance is still present in this film and is, in fact, even more widespread than in the other films I address. In short, *Saturday Night Fever* is a serious critique of style over substance in all classes. *Saturday Night Fever* begins with two people who think they can become what they want through a change in style, but ends with a thoughtful statement about the importance of personal growth. The film ends as Tony and Stephanie promise to help each other to achieve their goals; therefore, the film is ultimately

more about the importance of personal change rather than about how to negotiate upward mobility. In this way, the film is able to negatively critique the excesses of both upper and working classes; but it never questions the value of upward mobility.

Likewise, the film deals with the racism and sexism that are often presented by the media as part of working-class life. Although this type of stereotyping of the working class is problematic in that it furthers misconceptions about the working class (Ehrenreich 1995), it is interesting to this study because it allows an analysis of many sexist and racist attitudes. The film portrays Tony's living conditions as very unpleasant. His family life is seen at the dinner table where he, his parents, grandmother, and younger sister argue during their meals. Tony feels that his family considers him a failure; so he tells his brother, "I always felt like the shit of the family." Jordan (1996, 118) argues that Tony's "parents follow a culture of traditional gender roles in which an ethos of economic individualism subverts the communal values of the family dinner hour." Tony's family, peers, and working-class environment fail to provide him with any positive feelings about himself. Tony explains to his dad after his father makes light fun of Tony's four dollar raise at the paint store, saying "[Y]ou know how many times somebody has told me I'm good? Two times: This raise today and dancing at the disco."

The violent, racist, homophobic, and misogynist behavior of the young working-class boys in Tony's neighborhood is disturbing. This film provides a useful counter-critique of the working class that is absent in the other films I have investigated. Tony and his macho friends are portrayed in a negative manner. They are both racist and sexist in their speech and behavior and have few hopes that their futures will be prosperous. This is evident when the boys are talking about an expensive car: "We ain't never gonna have that kinda money. Nobody gives ya nothing. It's a stinking rat race." Here, fate is portrayed as working against the boys. Their lives are going nowhere, and there is no reason to believe that things will change. His friends' attitudes and behavior disgust Tony, and he is torn between his desire to escape his life and his desire to stay with his friends. Nonetheless, Tony remains a part of the group despite his growing feelings of dissatisfaction. He is an accomplice in many of their

violent, misogynist, racist, demeaning, risky, and sometimes criminal activities. Yet, as the film progresses, Tony becomes less of a willing participant and seems more trapped into the activities of the group by being emotionally unable to escape the group. He tells the other boys that they "have a lot of growing up to do," and he expresses boredom with their activities.

The climax of Tony's dissatisfaction occurs when he and Stephanie win the dance contest. Tony knows that the second place Hispanic couple had a superior performance and deserved to win first place, but they were denied their rightful award because of racist judges. Tony explodes in a rage and gives the Hispanic couple the first place trophy and cash prize while he yells that the contest was rigged. He tells Stephanie the reason they won was that the second place couple were outsiders and explains that he hates his life because "everybody is dumping on everybody." This catalyst sets off Tony's moral crisis, which peaks in an attempted rape soon afterward.

Tony's decision to give the first place award to the Hispanic couple reveals his disgust with the racism inherent in such a judgment and, therefore, forces him to investigate his own feelings of racism against the Hispanic Americans in his neighborhood. Violence between the two groups has been commonplace for Tony throughout his life, and the macho code of his male group has required that they be involved in a long series of violent attacks and revenge assaults. Tony is disillusioned by the racism of his peer group and pushed to an emotional breaking point. His psychological condition is dangerously explosive. In a fit of macho violence, Tony attempts to rape Stephanie; however, Stephanie thwarts the rape attempt. Tony and his friends go off on a drive to the bridge where two of the boys rape their friend Annette. Additionally, one of the boys, Bobby, who is distraught because his girlfriend is pregnant, jumps to his death from the bridge.

This series of events forces Tony into an emotional breakdown. His actions and his friends' behavior have forced him to a moral breakpoint where he must choose to sever the relationship or be lost forever in this racist and misogynist world he hates. Tony watches as his old world disintegrates, and he chooses a new path by leaving his old life and traveling

to Manhattan to find Stephanie. When he arrives at her place, he tells her the he will never return to his old life. It is then that they agree to help each other make new lives as friends. Tony is a changed person.

Saturday Night Fever makes the strongest argument for personal growth of any of the films discussed in this chapter. In this film, personal growth is the clear key to successful fulfillment of one's dreams. Tony's dream is not as obvious as Tess's desire for an executive job or Zack's mission to be an officer and a gentleman or Alex's quest to be a ballerina; instead, it is a fervent desire to escape his misogynistic, racist, and dead-end life in Brooklyn.

In the end, Tony realizes his dream by physically breaking with Brooklyn and moving to upscale Manhattan. Of course, Tony's transformation may not be as satisfying as seeing Tess defeat her evil boss, Zack scoop Paula up in his arms, or Alex embrace Nick after she is accepted into the dance academy; but it is important because it focuses, more than the other films, on personal growth. Both Tony and Stephanie are able to overcome the racist, misogynist, and homophobic bias of the people who surround them and purify their motives in a powerful display of the moralistic ideals of the American Dream. In addition, they are both shown as hardworking and dedicated individuals through their devotion to dance. Granted, great disco dancing may not seem to be a worthwhile endeavor to everyone; but that is really a matter of taste. Is being a ballet dancer really a more worthy goal? Or is this just another example of how cultural snobbery is reinforced in Hollywood film?

The Enduring Nature of the American Dream

In this chapter, I dealt with working-class characters who achieve upward mobility and, therefore, support the American Dream. Stories of successful upward mobility are common in Hollywood films. In fact, there are many well-known movies that fall into the general category of Cinderella stories: *Angus*, *Arthur*, *B.A.P.'s*, *Born Yesterday* (both versions), *Celestial Clockwork*, *Cinderella*, *Cinderfella*, *Evita*, *First Love*, *Flashdance*, *Hero*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Milk Money*, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, *Mrs. Winterbourne*, *My Fair Lady*, *Once Around*, *Pretty Woman*, *Pygmalion*,

Splash, *A Star Is Born*, *Stroke of Midnight*, *Up Close and Personal*, *Working Girl*, and *The World of Suzie Wong* (Connors and Craddock 1998, 985). Indeed, these are just some of the films made in this vein. In this chapter, I investigated four contemporary Hollywood movies that tell stories of hardworking protagonists who achieve upward mobility: *Working Girl* (1988), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Flashdance* (1983), and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), just a few films that capitalize on the Cinderella formula as an integral part of their plot summaries.

Upward-mobility films suggest that the materialistic myth of the American Dream is alive and well despite obvious structural obstacles. This filmic view has its foundations in the belief that America is a classless society where anyone, from even the most humble beginnings, can achieve wealth and status. Likewise, the movies bolster the idea that success and failure are individually determined. As Thio explains:

> The American ideology of success . . . encourages the populace (1) to raise their level of aspirations and (2) to believe in the established society as one with abundant opportunities. . . . the latter may be regarded functional in terms of their blaming themselves rather than the society for their deprivation. (1972, 381)

The films communicate that success is the result of hard work and moral uprightness. Further, they argue that these are the hallmarks of good moral character and substance.

The American public clings to the belief in the attainability of the American Dream despite real-life experiences that demonstrate that the citizens of the United States are not all being treated fairly. Accordingly, these films communicate to the viewers a heartening, encouraging, and healthy view of the United States as the land of the American Dream. The movies suggest that there is no reason for dismay, loss of spirit, or doubting that the American Dream is the birthright of all Americans regardless of race, class, or gender. The movies argue that the American Dream is just as true now as ever as long as each individual is willing to do what is required to achieve it. Thus, all social action is negated. There is no need for progressive social policies. A collective movement is not warranted. There are no reasons for launching a full-scale assault on the

institutions and policies that bolster discrimination along lines of race, class, and gender. All social problems are reduced to problems that individual's must address for themselves.

Moralizing Mobility

In Hollywood cinema, the individual-versus-society conflict is almost always settled in an endorsement of the individual; and societal inequalities are diluted to the individual's success or failure. Character, virtue, romantic allure, and other bodily, psychological, and emotional states of self are the remedy for an imbalanced social structure that bolsters a hierarchy of advantaged groups despite an American belief in social welfare (Gunther 1947; Solomon and McMullen 1991). Accordingly, rather than themes of social action to improve social imbalances, Horatio Alger and Cinderella narratives are embedded in cinema. Thus, filmic class identifications are often presented as the fate of the individuals, with which they must struggle to find authentic individual heroism and autonomy or in which they will escape a situation that is not their fate. The ideology of romantic individualism, combined with a culture that valorizes self-change, allows the fate of these individuals to become a drama in which upward mobility is shown as the proper way to correct societal imbalances. These narratives are a prescription for the correct values and moral substance that are required for successful upward mobility. Their lesson is that America does not suffer from unfair social imbalances. The American Dream is intact; and if you are a good, hard-working, and moral person, you will achieve your dream.

The filmic account of class differences is principle to my study of the American Dream. The American Dream, with its belief in success through hard work and moral uprightness, is challenged by the everyday experience of failure. In fact, the reality of the American Dream is that more people are falling down the social ladder than are climbing up it (Braun 1991; Ehrenreich 1989, 1990).

Working Girl is typical of the American Dream in film. The requirement to uphold the classless state of American society while maintaining a need to be socially mobile is given a solution. This solution, moralizing

mobility, is coded in the film, and allows individualism to eclipse social action as the way of solving social problems. The ideological work these simple films perform is a testament to both their persistence and popularity. They further the ideological work of the naturalization of the American Dream; and, therefore, these unassuming movies carry profound ideological baggage.

Working-Class Heroes and the Working-Class Life

There is a related issue concerning this group of films, the fact that many of these characters represent working-class heroes, people who achieve their personal goals. However, in order to be a working-class hero, he or she must transcend the working class, becoming a working-class hero precisely because he or she is no longer working class.

It is problematic that the working-class environment of these movies is demonstrated as being unable to foster success. Regardless of whether it is portrayed as almost completely devoid of anything nurturing, as in *Saturday Night Fever*, or full of loving and caring individuals, as in *Flashdance*, the working-class support group seems totally unable to help one of its own succeed. That ability resides only within individuals.

The films offer the general spectrum of working-class environments: grey, drab, dangerous, overcast, and populated with losers. Sometimes the losers are nurturing; but often they are racist, misogynist, homophobic, and destructive. In terms of upward mobility, the characters cannot go home, and why would they want to? The value of upward mobility is never questioned in these films; in fact, it is lauded as the correct goal of those with the personal moral substance to enact upward mobility. The filmic portrayal of working-class life almost always encourages leaving. It takes many forms, Brooklyn to Manhattan and Mawby's Bar to the dance academy. The rhetoric of these films is always leaving. The films never communicate that working-class heroes should stay to try and make things better.

CHAPTER 3

Moralizing Failure

In Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*, up-and-coming dealmaker Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) stares off the balcony of his chic Manhattan apartment and in a troubled voice reflects, "Who am I?" Bud began as a neophyte stockbroker, but by hook and crook worked his way into the fast-paced world of insider trading and corporate raiding of Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), the self-made mega-player and guru of entrepreneurial greed. At the end of the movie, Bud Fox answers his own question in a confrontation with Gekko, "I'm just Bud Fox, and as much as I want to be Gordon Gekko, I'll always be Bud Fox." Bud faces a jail sentence and family shame for his Securities Commission violations, but his realization is a moral victory. His virtuous, union boss father, a blue-collar hero, explains: "[I]n a way, it's the best thing that could happen to you." The expression of redemption on Bud's face suggests that Bud agrees, for he has rediscovered himself and his moral character by surviving the temptations of corruption and greed.

In the previous chapter, I examined films where the characters were moral candidates for the American Dream and were successful in their bids for upward mobility. In this chapter, I look at films in which the working-class characters fail in their attempts at upward mobility, but learn important lessons about who they are and the nature of the American Dream. I examine *Wall Street*, *The Firm* (1993), *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1987), *Breaking Away* (1979), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), and *The Flamingo Kid* (1984). In these films, the heroes strongly desire mobility, but fail in their attempts because they

lose sight of their morals. In some cases, the protagonists are corrupted by greed or other malicious desires; in others, they merely stray from the moral path. In all cases, their moral fiber is tested; and they undergo a personal conversion during which they relearn the truth and goodness of their basic working-class values. Even though the characters fail in their bids for upward mobility, like Bud in *Wall Street*, their experiences allow them to understand their true selves and recognize the importance of moral virtue over material gain. Simultaneously, the films reinforce the moral aspects of the American Dream for their audiences as the failures of the protagonists are moralized.

Wall Street

Wall Street is an overt comment on big business, the greedy lifestyles and morals of the players involved, and a discourse on working-class values. Director Oliver Stone criticizes the values and immorality of greed and, in so doing, comments on the corruption of the decade of greed. At the same time, the film valorizes the morality of the working class. Although Bud is the film's protagonist, the action revolves around the movie's three central characters: Bud Fox, his father Carl (Martin Sheen), and Gordon Gekko, Bud's ultra-wealthy mentor. Bud is a lean and hungry stockbroker at the bottom of the business but aspires to be on top, a player. Carl is the film's most prominent working-class character, a hard-working, loving dad and a trustful airplane mechanic who smokes too much and drinks beer after work with his crew at a working-class bar in Queens. Carl is also the boss for the mechanics union at Blue Star Airlines. Gekko, the epitome of the ultra-rich corporate raider, becomes Bud's mentor. Gekko is the classic greedy villain who shuns all moral good in a ruthless pursuit of more money. To chronicle Bud's fall, the film juxtaposes Bud's moral working-class upbringing as personified by Carl with Gekko's inveigling of Bud and his immoral training. The key to understanding the film's rhetoric is to see Bud transform from a moral candidate to an immoral failure in his interactions with Carl and Gekko.

For example, Carl does not entirely understand Bud's ambition to be a player because he sees upper-class overindulgences as shallow and

wasteful. When Bud comes to borrow money, Carl lovingly admonishes him for getting a college loan to attend Harvard and then spending every penny he earns to live in expensive Manhattan. Bud believes that Manhattan is the place to achieve the American Dream, just like Tess in *Working Girl* and Tony and Stephanie in *Saturday Night Fever*. Bud explains to Carl that he needs to live the successful lifestyle if he is every going to truly make it big: "[T]here's no nobility in poverty, dad. Someday you're gonna be proud of me."

Yet, Carl feels no pride in Bud when his son is seduced by greed. Bud's climb to player status is juxtaposed with his decline in moral conduct, while Carl's "I've never measured a man's success by the size of his wallet" nobility is affirmed. Bud stands as Stone's critique of a decade of greed that valorized style over substance and that forsook the values that pulled the country out of the Depression and through World War II. Gekko represents, and Bud aspires to, a morality of greed that is not humanitarian and undermines Bud's working-class virtues.

Carl exists as the moral center, the voice of reason and good that protects the moral high ground, which is clearly juxtaposed with Gekko's creed of greed. In the end, the audience is asked to see Carl's goodness in contrast to Gekko's evil and decide that Bud is better off with working-class nobility than with the ignoble excesses of greed. This is a warning to the people who would choose the shallow and immoral path of greed over the virtuousness of hard work, sacrifice, and fair play. There is no neutral place in this narrative. Gone is the happiness of upward mobility in *Working Girl* and its ilk, and all that is left is Stone's unmerciful attack on the cult of greed that prevailed during the 1980s and his more general assault on the basic immorality of upper-class improbity. Carl stands as the American Dream icon of hard work and moral uprightness that is this film's equivalent of *Working Girl*'s Statue of Liberty.

Zaniello (1996, 268) points out that *Wall Street* "takes its plot line from . . . events of the 1980s: the struggle between Eastern Airlines and the IAM and, the 'insider' trading scandals typified by Ivan Boesky." The movie shows how an aspiring young man is seduced and corrupted by the immorality of corporate raiding. Fraser (2001, 121) explains that the 1980s were a heady time that offered white-collar workers "a fast-for-

ward version of the American Dream: a new career equation befitting a rapidly changing corporate world." Bud wants to work for leading trader and player Gekko and gets into his good graces by providing insider information about Blue Star Airlines that he learned from his father. This immoral action is the turning point for Bud and serves as his conversion to corruption. He is seduced by Gekko's temptations, betraying his father's trust. This move helps Bud win Gekko's ill-gotten favors but also brings ruinous results for Carl and his hardworking union coworkers. Bud believes that he can turn his immoral act into a plan to save Blue Star Airlines; but, in fact, he sold out to Gekko's greed.

Gekko is impressed with Bud's insider tip and begins the process of transforming Bud into a player. Gekko woos Bud with a high-priced prostitute and limo ride as a reward; however, it does not take long for Gekko to reveal his harder side. After Gekko loses money on a stock deal that Bud executes, he admonishes Bud for his failure—"sheep get slaughtered"—since Gekko doesn't want timid traders. Instead, Gekko wants "poor, smart, hungry" people with "no feelings." Bud panics as he sees his newfound success fading and begs for another chance. Gekko explains to Bud that he does not need a stockbroker who plays by the rules but one who will get him information illegally, unethically, and immorally. Bud struggles with this unprincipled mandate because he knows from his working-class upbringing that these are unscrupulous ways to get what you want, and he does not want to abandon his virtuous rearing. He counters Gekko's proposal with "[W]hat about hard work?"

In a refusal to acknowledge the correct motives for the American Dream, Gekko angrily replies, "[M]y father worked like an elephant until he dropped dead at 49," thus suggesting to Bud that hard work is not rewarded. Instead of working hard and succeeding because of the proper motives, Gekko suggests that if Bud does illegal and unethical things, Bud will be a player. Bud realizes that Gekko is asking him to give up on Carl's values; but his selfish ambition is so great that Bud gives in to Gekko's demands and plainly states, "You got me."

Bud began his quest for upward mobility with the proper motives for success, as did the characters in chapter two; but with the decision to get Gekko information in unethical and even illegal ways, Bud loses sight of

his father's working-class values. The film dramatically shows Bud's rise to power through a montage of scenes that demonstrate the illegal, unethical, and immoral practices he undertakes to get insider information. For example, we see Bud pretending to be the janitorial supervisor of high-rise business buildings to gain illegal access to important documents. Likewise, Bud pulls others into his scheme by squashing their moral complaints with his "nobody gets hurt" explanation for his unethical and illegal actions.

This point is indicative of the 1980s and the dubious *Wall Street* mindset. Bud abandons "what about hard work?" for a "success at any cost" mindset. He refuses to hear the moral objections raised by the people he tricks into helping him in his relentless pursuit of greed. Simultaneously, Bud achieves the successful material lifestyle he desires. His dress, residence, food, and even his lover Darien (Daryl Hannah) reflect a player's cultured tastes and expensive price tags. Bud has achieved his goals and the material perks that accompany them. At his peak, Bud accompanies Gekko to a Teldar Paper stockholder meeting, a company that Gekko is going to raid. During this meeting, Gekko performs the now infamous speech, "Greed is good, greed is right, greed works." Bud is inspired to develop a takeover plan for Blue Star Airline; however, Bud does not plan to raid Blue Star but believes he can make it more profitable through union compromises and make himself president. Bud and Gekko approach Carl to get him to convince the union to make concessions, but Carl is not persuaded. Carl does not believe that Blue Star would be better off or that his union men will benefit. He admonishes Bud for working with Gekko: "I don't go to sleep with no whore, and I don't wake up with no whore, and I don't know how you do it." Carl does not understand how Bud cannot see his judgment error, but Bud is blinded by greed.

The deal proceeds without Carl until Bud realizes that Gekko is going to take over Blue Star, sell the pieces for profit, and raid the company's rich retirement fund. Incensed, Bud confronts Gekko and asks why he wants to destroy Blue Star. Gekko responds, "Because it's wreckable. It's all about the bucks, kid." Bud, in righteous indignation, screams, "How much is enough?" Gekko responds, "It's not a matter of enough. It's a

zero-sum gain. Somebody wins, somebody loses, capitalism at its best." Thus, Bud is finally forced to acknowledge his immorality and greedy motives. Bud finally realizes that, indeed, somebody always gets hurt. That is the zero-sum gain that Gekko's cult of greed breeds.

Bud's greedy ambitions led to family betrayal, and he finally accepts that Gekko's practices are immoral. Gekko cuts Bud off from the ill-gotten rewards of unethical business, and Bud falls quickly from his lofty player position. He realizes that he has been used and that to fight back will mean that Gekko will break him. One by one, Bud's rewards are lost: Darien leaves, he sells his chic apartment, and he is driven to drown his sorrows in alcohol in an unfurnished flat. During this rapidly edited sequence, Bud learns that Carl has experienced his second heart attack and lies in the hospital in critical condition. Bud goes to him and confesses his immoral behavior, swears to right his wrongs, and speaks the telling words "You're the only honest man I know," signaling his move back to his father's values.

Bud is restored to his true self and to Carl's working-class values. He realizes that he has been wrong and that he must stop Gekko. Bud double-crosses Gekko by being wired electronically so that Gekko can incriminate himself on tape. This is Bud's redemptive act. By implicating Gekko, he saves Blue Star but incriminates himself. Bud must pay the price for his misdeeds by facing punitive measures. He recaptures his moral virtue, and that is most important. This is what Carl means when he says that Bud's disgrace is really the best thing that could have happened. Even though Bud faces a legal battle and probable jail time, Carl explains that the results are for the best because Bud has saved himself from greed. Carl's values help Bud realize his error and work toward a "noble end" (Zaniello 1996, 268).

The rhetoric of *Wall Street* urges audiences to accept and valorize working-class morality. Gekko's wealth and power seduces Bud, who desires upward mobility. Once he realizes the immorality of corporate raiding, Bud understands that he must reject greed and re-embrace his father's working-class values. In this way, the film never criticizes the desire for upward mobility, only Bud's improper means. Once consumed by greed, Bud relinquishes his honest attempt at upward mobility. First,

Bud short-circuits the materialistic myth that "relates to the values of effort, persistence, 'playing the game,' initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success" (Fisher 1973, 161) by using insider information, cheating, stealing, and lying. Second, he ignores the moralistic myth that involves "the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for dignity and worth of each and every individual" (Fisher 1973, 161) by selling out his father and the the workers of Blue Star Airlines. Since Bud ignores the requirements of the American Dream, his desire for upward mobility is thwarted. He must fail in his attempt at upward mobility, yet he is redeemed as he returns to his working-class roots. The message of this film is that working-class morality is much better than ill-gotten upper-class rewards.

The Firm

Producer and director Sydney Pollack's 1993 film *The Firm* shares the theme of the morally corrupt rich and unethical business practices of American powerbrokers. This time, the focus is not on stockbrokers but on lawyers. Brown (1993) states, "*The Firm* means to expose the underbelly of the amorally acquisitive '80s" (par. 3), and Kempley (1993) agrees by calling it an "office-bound saga of careerism and greed" (par. 3).

Much like Gekko's seduction of Bud in *Wall Street*, Mitch McDeere (Tom Cruise) is inveigled by the powerfully rich Memphis law firm Bendini, Lambert, and Locke, known to all as the Firm. Mitch is the poor kid who makes good at Harvard Law School and becomes the choice of prestigious law firms. *The Firm* visually excludes most of Mitch's working-class background because its primary focus is on his time spent with the Firm after finishing law school. However, the viewer does see that prior to joining *The Firm*, Mitch and his wife Abby (Jeanne Tripplehorn) live in a crummy little Boston apartment and drive a rattletrap automobile. After joining the Firm, Mitch and Abby live in a tastefully decorated home and drive a silver Mercedes provided by the Firm. Moreover, the viewer is educated about Mitch's roots through discussions. The audience learns that Mitch's father was killed in the coalmines as a hardwork-

ing but exploited miner. Mitch's past drives his need to succeed; but instead of maintaining his focus on helping the exploited and helpless in society, Mitch is seduced by the wealth and power of the Firm. In other words, his desires for upward mobility are corrupted by greed; and he is used by the powerful firm for unethical, criminal, and immoral reasons.

Abby acts as a moral barometer for the audience as she sees Mitch abandoning his noble motives in favor of greed. She understands that he is abandoning his law school desire to help those who cannot help themselves and is being driven by ambition. After they move to Memphis, Mitch pours himself into his work, straining his personal relationship with Abby. Abby sees Mitch's devotion to the Firm as a corrupting influence and does not want the financial security provided by the Firm to come at the price of Mitch's ideals. Abby wants their relationship to be a simple life lived right. She prefers that Mitch do self-fulfilling work that would help others; but Abby realizes that Mitch is being seduced by the power, wealth, and prestige of the Firm.

Abby fears that Mitch will lose his moral center and passion for the underdog as he is drawn further into the Firm's "success is everything" mentality. Mitch fools himself into believing that he is helping Abby. Mitch says, "I want to give you everything you gave up [financially] to marry me." However, Abby rejects this: "You know what you want, but it's not for me. It's not even for you." Mitch counters, "It's easy for someone rich to talk about being poor." Abby is adamant and cuts him off: "This isn't about rich and poor. It's about trying to fix something that won't get fixed with ten Mercedes. It's about a mother in a trailer park and a brother you pretend you don't have." Abby suggests that Mitch's ambition springs from his desire to escape his humble origins. She believes that Mitch is trying to distance himself from his trailer-park mother and convict brother and remake himself into a successful and prestigious lawyer.

Abby is correct. During the Firm's interview, Mitch lies about his mother and denies having siblings. Of course, telling the Firm that his brother Ray (David Strathairn) is in jail could have cost him the job; but that does not excuse Mitch for denying a brother who "was always there" for him when he was growing up. This suggests that Mitch is, as Abby

implies, trying to deny his past in his bid for upward mobility. This denial of his working-class roots is both immoral and unfair to the people who raised him. Although Mitch's original reasons for upward mobility were noble, he has forsaken them and his family to become a wealthy lawyer. His desire to deny his past is significant, as it will be his brother who helps him escape, save his life, and destroy the evil Firm. Despite his criminal record and imprisonment, Mitch's brother Ray displays the type of moral center and love for others that far outshines the debauchery of the Firm's members. There are also two other good, working-class characters: Eddie Lomax (Gary Busey), Ray's friend and former cellmate, and Tammy Hemphill (Holly Hunter), Eddie's secretary. Together with Ray and Abby, these four comprise the moral-value counterweight to the corrupt Firm, much like Carl is the moral counterbalance to Gekko's greed in *Wall Street*. Lomax and Hemphill are portrayed as rowdy, randy, and redneck; but they both put their lives on the line (indeed, Lomax dies) trying to help Mitch because he is Ray's brother and because it is the right thing to do. These unselfish acts highlight the importance of friendship and family to these working-class characters, thus placing them in contrast to Mitch, who willingly rejects his family for personal gain.

Eventually, Mitch realizes that the Firm is crooked. Thus, he is caught between the Justice Department and the Mafia. The Justice Department wants him to give evidence that will convict members of the Firm for laundering Mafia money (an act that will disbar him). His other choice is to be murdered by the Firm. Indeed, the Firm attempts this with Mafia hit men. Unlike in *Wall Street*, where Bud has to pay for his illegal actions with legal problems and probable jail time, Mitch figures out how he can beat the Firm and the FBI and remain a lawyer. Therefore, *Wall Street*, made several years before *The Firm*, offers the stronger admonition against accepting the immoral tenets of greed by punishing its protagonist. However, although *The Firm* pardons Mitch with an improbable conclusion, it is no less a strong argument against the improperness of greedy motives and the ill-fated results of adopting them.

Of course, as in *Wall Street*, the message is not that upward mobility is wrong, but that the wrong motives for mobility lead to failure and

even disaster. The characters who try to achieve the American Dream with improper motives bring disaster and unhappiness to themselves and their loved ones. In this case, Mitch attempts mobility for the wrong motives and causes the death of Lomax, endangers his marriage, risks his life, and forces his spouse to commit an immoral act to save him.

In the end, because Mitch rejects greedy ambition and returns to his working-class morals, the corrupt firm is disclosed and its illegal ways thwarted. Mitch and Abby drive away from Memphis in their old, beat-up car, visually suggesting that they are leaving the material wealth, privilege, and corrupt lifestyle behind and both literally and figuratively returning to where they belong. The possibility of his future mobility is intact as long as Mitch holds the proper motives. The morality of this drama does not simply tell about the working class versus the upper class, but warns against how the wrong motives will thwart the successful realization of the American Dream. In short, the class issues raised are reduced to the level of individuals and their morals, rather than investigating how the social structures involved are at the heart of a non-egalitarian system. The film does not revile Mitch's desire for upward mobility but condemns his selfish reasons for upward mobility. Mitch is seduced by greed and, therefore, doomed to fail in his attempt. However, since he is redeemed, he and Abby may return to the moral high ground; and he is once again ready for a bid at upward mobility.

Someone to Watch Over Me

The upper-class lifestyle is again contrasted against the working class in Ridley Scott's romantic drama *Someone to Watch Over Me.* A recently promoted police detective, Mike Keegan (Tom Berenger) is assigned to protect Claire Gregory (Mimi Rogers), a wealthy socialite. The rich woman is both beautiful and vulnerable, and the two develop a complex relationship. Kempley (1987) describes this cross-class fantasy film:

> Berenger plays a happily married cop who becomes sexually involved with a homicide witness from the Upper East Side [of New York] . . . he's the beefy but attractive detective Mike Keegan. . . . Making "dees" of these and "dose" of those, he sounds like a commoner from Queens.

> Mimi Rogers . . . and newcomer Lorraine Bracco have the supporting roles as, respectively, the socialite Claire and the loving wife Ellie. There's a compelling chemistry between Berenger and the brunettes with Rogers' chilly elegance set against Bracco's blue-collar bravura.

Thus, Mike's love is torn between two women. He is also divided over his desire for the elegance of the upper-class lifestyle and his love for his working-class family that seems to hold him back from success. Mike is seduced by Claire and her privileged lifestyle. He wants to leave his working-class life and be with Claire. Since Mike truly loves Claire, he should be with her; but this film complicates the "true love" motive by presenting Mike with a moral dilemma.

This film is important to my analysis because it complicates the true love motive. In other films that revolve around true love, it is obvious to the audience that the lovers belong together; however, *Someone to Watch Over Me* presents the viewer with two very probable resolutions. The first is that Mike and Claire's steamy romance will blossom into true love, and they will be together or, secondly, that Mike will realize that his love for Ellie and his family are more important and end his relationship with Claire. Either of these is possible and could indeed be proper Hollywood movie endings.

This Hollywood love narrative is more complicated than most, as it does not use typical narrative devices that help demonstrate to the audience which woman Mike is fated to choose. For example, a common narrative device would be to make one of the women insufferably bitchy and impossible to please. If this woman were Ellie, then Mike would appear as the long-suffering husband who needs and deserves a good woman. Another typical Hollywood device would make Claire a hateful shrew, but Mike would be oblivious until the end when something would reveal her meanness and he would return to Ellie. Instead, in this movie, both women have positive and negative aspects; and either would be a good companion.

The real problem lies with Mike. Although he struggles with his attraction to Claire, he is to blame for their affair. All of his friends and colleagues admonish him for his indiscretions. Therefore, Mike is

guilty of a self-centered, immoral decision for which he should be held accountable without condemning either Claire or Ellie. It is important to point out that Claire is not the narrative villain. For example, she is not a rich seductress. Claire is both scared for her life and a prisoner in her own home. Therefore, her vulnerability allows the audience to pity her frailty. The responsibility for the moral failure is clearly placed with Mike.

Someone to Watch Over Me maintains that upward mobility is a positive goal and communicates its appeal. Claire's world is more inviting than Ellie's. Claire's posh uptown apartment is rife with signifiers of a person born and bred in the cultured upper class. Fine art and expensive antique furniture adorn her rooms. Her penthouse is so large that Mike has trouble finding his way to her private elevator. In contrast, Mike and Ellie's home is a cramped house near the train tracks in Queens that looks dirty and shabby next to Claire's penthouse. As in *Working Girl, Saturday Night Fever,* and *Wall Street,* Manhattan represents the upper crust; and the boroughs are lower class. The film withholds any explicit negative critique of the upper class, and Claire is a likable character. Moreover, Claire's lifestyle is more comfortable and less stressful than Ellie's. Therefore, Mike's desire to attain the rewards of upward mobility seems reasonable; and the upper class is not condemned in the film's narrative.

Mike adopts an upper-class sensibility to aid his budding romance with Claire. His transformation begins innocently, with Claire's giving him a suitable tie from a fashionable store. Claire buys the tie to replace a gaudy one from Ellie. Claire knows that the kitschy tie will make Mike look foolish at the fancy-dress gala that he must attend as her protector; yet, Claire's role here is not the purely academic Henry Higgins. She is romantically interested in Mike and wants to improve his appearance. Their romantic attraction heats up as Claire tells Mike that he looks "elegant." Mike is pleased that he is attractive to Claire, and their love affair grows until it threatens his marriage. Mike seems ready to abandon Ellie and start his new life with Claire, complete with torrid sex and an upper-class lifestyle. Although the movie never attacks Claire, Mike's conduct is not lauded. His colleagues and friends disapprove of his

decision to leave Ellie. They did not begrudge him a romantic affair with a rich lover, but they rebuke him when it is obvious that he will abandon Ellie. Although the film spends less time developing Ellie's character, the movie uses cinematic shorthand to show that she is a good-hearted, loving, and supportive working-class wife and mother; therefore, it would be immoral to abandon her simply because Claire is richer. Similarly, his decision to dump Ellie goes against the romantic sentimentality of Hollywood film; and the audience sees this as morally wrong. Mike loves Claire, but he also loves Ellie. Therefore, selfishness is the only reason to choose Claire over his wife. In short, choosing Claire over Ellie is an immoral decision.

In the end, Mike realizes that family is more important than his romance with Claire and his desire for her posh surroundings. He returns to Queens, his family, and his blue-collar and blue-uniformed buddies. When he tells Claire that he must leave, he explains that he misses his "life too much." Claire accepts Mike's decision gracefully and decides to go on a long trip to help ease her pain. Mike realizes that his working-class roots, his family, and his friends are where he belongs and that it would be morally wrong for him to leave. Mike aborts his own upward mobility for his family and friends. His love for Ellie and his need to do the right thing, the moral thing, wins out over his desire for Claire and upward mobility. Like Mitch McDeere and Bud Fox, Mike does not achieve the upward mobility that he desires; however, unlike Mitch and Bud, Mike is not punished for his less-than-moral attempt at upward mobility. True love ameliorates Mike's chastisement in this morality tale. He loves both women; and before he tempts fate too far, he regains his moral footing and makes the right choice.

The rhetoric of *Someone to Watch Over Me* is the same as *Wall Street* and *The Firm*: to attempt upward mobility for the wrong reasons is immoral, and working-class values eventually show the protagonist the error of his ways. The American Dream can only be achieved by a moral candidate, and moral failure is superior to immoral success.

However, as in so many of the films that I have investigated, *Someone to Watch Over Me* does not condemn the upper-class lifestyle. In fact, the movie makes upward mobility very appealing, especially since Holly-

wood often portrays working-class life as dull, drab, common, and difficult. The message of these films is that it is okay to want upward mobility because it is a worthy reward for hard work and perseverance. In other words, there is nothing wrong with being upper class. Problems only result when a working-class protagonist seeks upward mobility for immoral reasons.

The Flamingo Kid

Garry Marshall's *The Flamingo Kid* focuses on a young man, Jeffrey Willis, who leaves his beloved working-class family to be a parking valet and cabana boy at a posh beach club for one golden summer. Unfortunately, Jeff also rebels against his blue-collar father's values in favor of the beautiful, rich Flamingo Beach Club members' morals. The movie opens with eighteen-year-old Jeffrey (Matt Dillon) hanging out with his friends in his Brooklyn neighborhood. Jeffrey is a good kid who wears his father's military dog tags as a way of demonstrating his love and respect for his dad. Jeff brags to his friends that his father, Arthur (Hector Elizondo), secured Jeff an office boy job with a local engineering firm. Jeffrey and Arthur are excited about this opportunity because Jeffrey is planning to start college as an engineering student in the fall, and they believe this summer job is a leg up because Jeff's family sees his college education as way of achieving the American Dream.

This introduction to Jeffrey is significant for two reasons. First, it establishes Jeffrey's love for and devotion to his father; and second, it ensconces Jeffrey's education as an important goal. Arthur's dream is for his children to be educated. He tells Jeffrey, "I may be just a plumber, but I'm a good plumber. I give a dollar's work for a dollar's pay, but I still have some dreams. One of them is that my children become educated." In order to achieve this dream, Arthur is a frugal person. He drives an older car that tends to overheat, and he keeps his family in a Brooklyn apartment long after it has become fashionable to move to the suburbs. In this way, the film establishes that Arthur has a working-class job, lifestyle, and value system. Arthur believes in hard work, honest work, education, and frugality—values he passed on to his son.

However, Jeffrey veers from his father's values when he is convinced to take a summer job at the Flamingo Beach Club. At the club, he is introduced to the upper class and their wealthy lifestyle. This new and exciting world seduces Jeffrey, who soon becomes ashamed of his working-class friends and family because they seem uncouth and common in comparison to his new beach-club friends. Jeffery's change is evident in the fact that he is embarrassed for his club friends to see his dad's aging car and starts to call their apartment "that dump in Brooklyn." Jeffrey is chagrined when his family shows up at the club one afternoon to invite him on a family outing. Jeffrey is annoyed and embarrassed because his family's dress and behavior marks them as working class. In contrast to Jeffrey's family, the people at the club seem financially successful and live in luxury. This luxury seduces Jeff, and he desires it for himself.

Likewise, Jeffrey becomes disdainful of his working-class peers. One morning, while waiting for the city bus to the beach club, he runs into an old neighborhood friend who invites him to hang out. Jeffrey is rude and impatient during the conversation and remarks when his friend leaves, "Geez, get me out of here [Brooklyn]." In a relatively short period, Jeffrey loses his family and neighborhood pride and simultaneously begins to think of them as his inferiors. His only concern becomes fitting into the upper-class life he desires.

Jeff has a problem similar to Mitch's in *The Firm*, as part of Jeffrey's discomfort with his family stems from his inability to fit them into his attempt at upward mobility. When Jeffrey's family is present at the club, his working-class roots are all too apparent, making Jeffrey uncomfortable. Like Mitch, knowledge of Jeff's family could tip off the upper crust to his true self. Unlike Mitch, Jeffrey has not had time to polish his speech and behavior in college; therefore, his working-class accent and manners are a constant reminder of his social class. He realizes that his Brooklyn accent and working-class manners make him stand out from the beautiful people at the club. Standing out means not fitting in, and Jeffrey desperately wants to fit in.

Jeffrey's conversion from adoring and obedient son to rebellious and ashamed offspring is the result of the club's seductively attractive world. Jeffrey is first invited to visit the club by some old neighbors who want him

to play in a low-stakes card game. Jeffrey's skill at cards is legendary among his Brooklyn peers; and so when these boys need to win money, they seek Jeff out. These old friends have successfully made upward mobility moves (actually, their parents have moved-on-up and taken the kids along). They are important points of reference for Jeffrey because they used to live in Brooklyn, but now they live in the suburbs and spend their summer days at the club. This makes Jeff doubt that his father's values are best. After all, he has proof that people just like him can successfully move up and out of Brooklyn and live materially more abundant lives.

In order to highlight this point, the movie presents the club from Jeffrey's point of view. The men at the club are successful and relaxed; the women are beautiful and carefree. One man who impresses Jeffrey is Phil Brody (Richard Crenna), a talented card player and successful businessman. The fact that he is known as the club's king of cards is of special significance to Jeffrey. Brody and his card team spend the summer playing gin for high stakes on the beach, a lifestyle that appeals to Jeffrey. Eventually, Jeffrey becomes Brody's cabana boy, which increases his exposure to Brody's lifestyle and his values.

Moreover, Jeffrey is interested in the Brody family's summer guest from California, Carla Samson. Carla (Janet Jones) is a sophomore at UCLA and Brody's niece. She and Jeffrey are attracted to one another. This magnetism further brings Jeffrey into Brody's world, as Carla often invites him to spend time with the family. Again, Jeff's working-class background causes him trouble. For example, Jeffrey's attire makes him stand out in a way that repulses the beautiful people. When he first meets Mrs. Brody, she asks, in a biting fashion, "Who are you, Jeffrey?" One of Jeffrey's card partners responds, "He's a card player, not a member," as a way of relieving Mrs. Brody's concerns. Later, Carla invites Jeffrey to dinner; and Mrs. Brody and her daughter Joyce are miffed that Carla invited the working-class "boy from the parking lot." Obviously, Mrs. Brody and her daughter feel that Jeff is beneath them socially.

However, Carla and Jeffrey seem to get along very well and begin a romance. Further, Jeffrey and Mr. Brody seem to enjoy each other's company. Jeffrey sees Mr. Brody as a very successful person that he would like to emulate. Brody enjoys Jeffrey's adulation. The relationship is

enhanced by their mutual love of cards. Brody decides to help Jeffrey advance at the club and gets Jeff promoted from valet to cabana boy. After this, Jeffrey and Brody spend more time together. Brody offers Jeffrey advice as they ride around in expensive sports cars, play cards, and hang out in the club's sauna and massage facilities. Brody is Arthur's antithesis, and Jeff embraces Brody as his new role model. Jeff is happy to leave Arthur's working-class values behind when he discovers the sage advice of the wealthy Brody.

It is not long after Jeffrey and Brody begin spending time together that Brody's advice begins to influence Jeffrey. One day Brody tells Jeffrey, "The salesmen of the world make the money. God put certain people on this earth to give you money and your responsibility is to take it. You have a hardworking father like mine, [but] I don't want that to happen to you." Brody is preaching the old P. T. Barnum belief that there is a sucker born every minute, and a clever man can take the suckers' money without giving them a fair deal. Brody's immoral rhetoric is persuasive, and he eventually convinces Jeffrey to avoid college. Jeffrey reports this to his father with this unethical explanation: "Money is the name of the game; and if you can make it easy, [then] college is overrated." But Arthur believes in honesty and hard work, the tenets of the American Dream. Arthur argues for the side of moral work over greedy salesmanship: "There are only two important things: finding out what you do well and what makes you happy. If God is smiling at you, then they will be the same thing." Arthur wants Jeff to understand that hard work is something to love, that it is a gift from God. Brody's view of work and of life is that the rewards justify the means, even if they are immoral. Brody tells Jeffrey that he can skip the hard work and still attain upper-class rewards if he is willing to be a ruthless salesman. Brody's "get it quick and easy" advice, coupled with the club's seductive lifestyle, convinces Jeffrey that if he is going to have it all and get it quickly, he must reject his father's values and pursue Brody's immoral business ideology. This is Jeff's moral failure. His desire for a better life is not condemned, but his acceptance of Brody's immoral lessons is damned.

Jeffrey decides that he must leave Brooklyn, his family, and his old way of life to realize his dreams. He leaves home and moves to the club.

Unfortunately, Jeffrey soon realizes that the end of summer brings the end of his short-lived taste of the good life. Carla goes back to California, his job at the club ends, and Brody rebuffs Jeff when he asks for a salesman job at Brody's car dealership. Yet, Jeff remains converted to Brody's immoral business acumen. In the final act, Jeffrey realizes that Brody has been cheating at cards all summer. In a fateful turn of events, Jeffrey gets to play high-stakes gin against Brody. In a game that lasts all Labor Day and into the night, Jeffrey beats Brody and tells his opponents how Brody has been cheating. This realization forces Jeffrey to accept that Brody is an immoral fake. Jeffrey's view of Brody changes completely, and he sees that his father was right all along. Jeffrey adopts his father's tone and readopts his father's values when he tells Brody, "You can't go around screwing your friends." That night, Jeffrey goes to dinner with his family; and he and his father embrace. In the end, Brody's immorality and his immoral value system is shown as unethical and undesirable. Jeffrey no longer wants to be part of Brody's dishonorable world; instead, he re-embraces his working-class life, family, and values.

Jeffrey returns to his family realizing that hard work and ethical means are the keys to achieving his dreams of upward mobility. Jeffrey's individual transformation is from innocence to experience; with this painful life lesson, his moral center is solidified and his understanding of what it means to be a good person is clarified. Moreover, Brody's immoral character and actions are finally exposed; and the audience is treated to a message that encourages the proper motives for upward mobility and warns of the punishment for those who attempt it improperly. It only takes a summer for Jeffrey to appreciate that his working-class family values are more valuable than a hedonistic lifestyle. Of course, Brody is not going to a *Wall Street* prison with Bud Fox, nor does he narrowly escape the Firm with his life as does Mitch McDeere; but Brody's loss is no less severe in the context of the individual films. Hollywood's morality of failed class mobility has many degrees. The *Flamingo Kid* focuses on a story of adolescent coming of age, not on adult immorality. Whether the viewer is a young person or an adult, he or she understands Brody's emotional pain at being bested by a Flamingo cabana boy and is socially embarrassed by his immorality. Brody's fall in

this movie is just as dramatic for this plot as Bud's unhinging of the greedy Gekko is in *Wall Street.*

This film does not attack the upper class for wholesale immorality. For the most part, the members of the club are fine people. They are a little peculiar and snobbish at times; but overall, the movie balances its stereotypes. The working-class members of this film are also portrayed in stereotypical ways. They often dress in tacky clothes, have annoying accents, and behave eccentrically in their own right. Jeffrey and Carla seem to represent the best of both worlds, as both are likable characters.

Moreover, Jeffrey's desire for upward mobility is not an immoral wish. The lifestyle at the club is very appealing, Carla is a wonderful young woman, and Jeff's fondness for her is genuine. The film makes a compelling argument for why a Brooklyn boy would aspire to the American Dream and want to avoid a low-paying job in a working-class world. The club offers Jeff his first glimpse of the good life, and it truly looks better to him than his father's life of slaving away in the hot city as a plumber forced to pinch pennies so his children can get the college education they need to succeed. However, Jeffrey's failure is that he develops an immoral attitude about his working-class roots. Jeffrey pits Brody's advice against his father's wishes in a type of upper-class versus working-class ideological argument and makes the immoral choice. The result is failure and disillusionment; but more importantly, he is taught the error of his ways and returns to his working-class values. Jeff's triumphant return to the morality of the working class is as redemptive as Carl Fox's pronouncement for his son's future: "In a way, it was the best thing that could happen."

Breaking Away

An excellent example of how a working-class boy learns the proper motives for upward mobility is the 1979 Academy Award winner for Best Screenplay, *Breaking Away.* Zaniello rightfully calls this film "class struggle on the asphalt track" (1996, 41). This film is a paradigm of Hollywood's ability to investigate class issues in the United States (Canby 1979; Zaniello 1996). Dave Stoller (Dennis Christopher), a young, working-

class man, adopts the wrong motives for upward mobility and learns that his working-class family values are superior. Therefore, in the end, he rejects his false role, embraces his working-class affiliation, and wins a race that shows that working-class boys are the equals of their privileged upper-class college counterparts.

The local boys represent a working-class lifestyle that is endangered by 1970's economics. Unlike their parents and grandparents, these young men cannot hope for jobs in the local quarry. To make matters worse, they are constantly reminded of their lower-class standing because the Indiana University college students look down their noses at the working-class locals. The class distinctions in Bloomington, Indiana, are sharp, as local quarry workers and their families, called "cutters," stand in stark contrast to the college residents. The golden men and women on campus have beautiful tans, drive nice cars, play Frisbee, and study occasionally. In contrast, Zaniello explains that the movie's "four antiheroes look and act scruffy, have graduated from high school but refuse to take [meaningless] jobs" (1996, 42). Zaniello continues, "Michael . . . sums up their dilemma: 'These college kids are never going to get old or out of shape. And they're going to call us "cutters." To them it's just a dirty word. To me it's just another thing I never got to be'" (1996, 42). The main problem facing the foursome is that the economic conditions that created prosperous working-class jobs for their grandparents and parents have ended. The quarry work that offered a livelihood and the eponymous moniker "cutters" no longer exists. Most of the quarries have closed, and most of the working-class jobs are gone.

The resulting depressed economy has left no hope of new jobs for the younger generation. Their choices are to move away, go to college, or take menial, low-paying service jobs at the car wash or grocery store. However, because of their working-class pride and desire to be quarry workers like their fathers, the boys are disaffected and reject service jobs. Further, college is economically out of the question for most of the boys because their parents' financial conditions are tenuous at best in the downsized economy.

Therefore, Moocher, Cyril, Mike, and Dave are negotiating life after high school and realizing that there is little American Dream left. Each

deals with his growing resentment in different ways, but together they form a peer group that offers each solace and a tie to their working-class culture. However, as they mature, they find that adult pressures make it difficult to maintain their group. Moocher wants to marry Nancy, who aspires to the head cashier position at the grocery store. Mike, the leader of the group, idealizes the Marlboro Man; and his response to most things is macho violence. In a scene that foreshadows the inevitable breakup of the group, Moocher tells Mike, "Time comes when we all have to go our own ways." Cyril plans to take the college entrance exam, but fears failure. Finally, Zaniello describes Dave and his desire for a better life:

> [Dave is] the most adjusted of the lot . . . whose obsession with cycling and all things Italian has led him to integrate Italy into his daily life . . . . Dave's way of crossing the class barriers . . . is to impersonate an Italian exchange student. . . . He falls into this deception innocently enough, trying to impress a [university] campus queen, [Katherine] . . . who is sweet and nice enough never to doubt that her serenading suitor is just a "cutter." (1996, 42)

Dave wishes upward mobility for some very good reasons, including trying to form, or perhaps to reform, his adult identity; but paramount is his desire to make a brighter future for himself. Since Dave cannot be a cutter, he latches onto the idea of being an Italian exchange student. This is a blithe rejection of his working-class life, not mean-spirited as is Jeff's in *The Flamingo Kid* or based on greed as is Bud's transformation in *Wall Street*. Dave continues to love his family and hang out with his friends. Indeed, Katherine is the only person who does not know that Dave's Italian persona is a just a fantasy. Dave, unlike several of the other characters in this chapter, does not face physical harm or loss of professional respect if his disguise is uncovered; and I doubt if the audience ever truly believes that Dave is planning to keep up his impersonation indefinitely. But his relationship with Katherine is very important to Dave; and he honestly believes that if she discovers his lie, she will lose interest. But his relatively harmless ruse is indicative of Dave's more significant identity crisis. In other words, Dave's fundamental rejection of who he is poses a

serious problem, even if his Italian bicyclist persona is basically harmless. Hence, Dave's motives are not malicious; but they are improper. At the heart of Dave's impersonation is a false identity created to reject his own identity. Dave takes his Italian game from the realm of harmless fun to an injurious ruse. Because he refuses to tell Katherine the truth, he ultimately dooms their relationship and indirectly incites jealous frat boys to assault and badly injure Cyril.

Despite his subterfuge, Katherine finally learns of Dave's deceit and breaks off their relationship. She tells him, "I liked you better before. Now you look like everybody else." Dave sadly affirms her remark, "I am everybody else." Dave is forced to see himself for what he is, and he must struggle with his real identity problems. But first, the date for the Indianapolis bicycle race arrives; and after a year's training, Dave finally gets to meet his Italian heroes, the Cinzano racing team. However, during the race, the Italians cheat and force Dave to wreck; and he learns that they are not honorable. This experience emotionally destroys Dave and helps bring an end to his Italian performance. In an insightful moment after the race, Mike says to Dave, "I guess you're a cutter again." Mike is correct. Dave's false identity has been stripped both off and from him, and all he has left is his working-class persona.

Dave is forced to inspect his allegiance to his family and to make a decision about where he belongs. Dejected, Dave returns home and tells his father, "Everybody cheats. I just didn't know." His dad embraces him and quietly responds, "Now, you know." Dave sadly removes all the posters of the Italian racers from his room and goes for a walk with his dad. They travel to the university library on campus. Mr. Stoller says, "I cut the stone for this building. I was damn proud of my work. I'd like to stroll through the campus and look at the limestone, but I feel out of place." Dave replies, "I don't want to go to college; to hell with them. I'm proud to be a cutter!" Mr. Stoller responds quietly, "You're not a cutter. I'm a cutter." Mr. Stoller forces Dave to realize that he can't just exchange the false Italian identity for the cutter identity because neither is Dave's identity. Thus, Dave must do the difficult work of forging his own identity. Mr. Stoller suggests that Dave give college a chance as himself, not as an Italian exchange student.

The university's administration decides to allow a cutters team to enter the annual college bike race in order to offer a supervised outlet for the recent cross-class aggressions between the frat boys and the locals. The college boys resent the cutters' intrusion into the race because they "just aren't good enough." Regardless, the film's foursome enters. Their plan is for Dave to ride the entire race alone and easily beat the college boys; but when Dave is injured, the other boys fill in long enough for Dave to come back at the end and win. Of course, in classic Hollywood fashion, the cutters not only win the race but also gain the respect of the frat boys. Thus, the longstanding class antagonisms are easily solved in this Hollywood plotline.

Dave decides to go to college, quickly meets a real French exchange student, and develops a budding romance with her. Thus, Dave's first real attempt at college is a way for him to forge his own unique identity. However, this time, Dave has both the proper motives and an honest interest in his college pursuits. Although Dave's attempt at a better life is not as explicit as Bud's desire to be a Manhattan stockbroker or Mitch's desire to be a rich lawyer, it is nonetheless similar in its importance to him. Dave is uncomfortable in his working-class world and assumes a fantasy impersonation as an Italian exchange student at the local college where the real Dave is scorned. Part of Dave's identity problem is that he believes negative stereotypes and sees his life as a dead end. Although he does not cast his family and friends to the side, as does Jeff in *The Flamingo Kid*, Dave nonetheless symbolically rejects his loved ones. He finds happiness with Katherine in his Italian exchange student persona and desperately wants to maintain the ruse. Unfortunately, the realities of class antagonism intrude; and Cyril, an innocent bystander, is hurt. As he is forced to face his identity crisis, Dave's father helps him to understand his situation. The old working-class persona is not his mantle to take up; Dave must forge a new identity for himself. In 1979, this was a prophetic statement, as the decade of greed loomed on the horizon, and the working class was doomed to many years of downsizing and despair. Although Dave can never be a cutter like his dad, he has learned that those working-class values are his and that he should never abandon them or be ashamed. Ultimately, Dave fails, but not because his Italian

persona is untenable. He fails because he rejects who he is and his family's working-class values. Once he re-embraces them and sets out on an honest pursuit, the audience can forecast a bright future for Dave.

Maid in Manhattan

Wayne Wang's 2002 romantic comedy *Maid in Manhattan* offers an interesting case of failed upward mobility with a fairytale ending. The protagonist, hardworking dreamer Marisa Ventura (Jennifer Lopez), aspires to move up from her maid job to become a manager at the ritzy hotel where she slaves away for ungrateful and pretentious rich people. Marisa is a moral candidate and deserves upward mobility but ultimately fails when she is dropped from the manager-training program and fired from her maid job. However, the reasons for her dismissal are tied to her romantic affair with the wealthy and powerful assemblyman Chris Marshall (Ralph Fiennes), heir to a great New York political dynasty and the next senator from New York. This part of the plot is sheer Cinderella, right down to the fancy-dress ball. In the end, Chris and Marisa couple; and the audience is given the impression that they will live happily ever after. But what happens to Marisa's overt desires to upgrade her job from maid to manager? The film does not bother to answer that question, and that omission makes this movie relevant to this study.

At first glance, it is obvious this movie is about the American Dream. The film opens with a dramatic tracking shot of the Statue of Liberty as the viewer is flown toward the Manhattan skyline. This overt use of the Statue of Liberty recalls its importance to the iconography of the American Dream as exploited in *Working Girl.* The camera deposits the audience in a working-class Bronx neighborhood complete with shots of grimy subways, rundown, graffiti-covered buildings, small storefront shops selling produce on the street, and trashcans littering the view. Nondiegetically, the audience enjoys the upbeat 1972 Paul Simon hit "Me and Julio down by the Schoolyard," featuring the lyrics "I'm on my way. I don't know where I'm going. I'm on my way." The significance of this is not explicit, but obviously the audience is in a Hispanic neighborhood.

Simon's tune is a nice introduction to this otherwise drab Hollywood version of working-class Bronx. Moreover, Marisa and her ten-year-old son Ty are on their way to his school and her maid job. Finally, the song's reference to Julio has at least a tenuous connection to the fact that Marisa is Hispanic.

This sequence is fairly typical for Hollywood. She is the adoring single mother doing all she can to nurture her son and get to work on time. Ty's father is noticeably absent as Marisa assures Ty that his father will be at school for Ty's afternoon class assembly speech on Richard Nixon. Of course, the dad does not show up; he is just another Hollywood stereotype: the deadbeat working-class father (Butsch 1995). Marisa's explanation to Ty is that his Dad got a construction job that paid time and half and so he had to take it. This is a lie, but an excuse that a working-class kid understands. Implicit in the explanation is the understanding that whenever workers can get a better wage for their labor, they must take the job regardless of the family hardships that it causes. In other words, workers must sacrifice family for the economic realities of working-class life. The absent father requires Ty to spend his after-school hours at the hotel, where he has the run of the place and is watched after by the other workers.

Working-class signifiers are prevalent. Marisa's clothes are in muted colors, off-the-rack fits, and are utilitarian but do little to compliment her beauty. The city is crowded, dirty, and noisy. Marisa and Ty take a city bus to his school, and Marisa rides the subway further to her job. She eats her breakfast on the run and just makes it to her hourly wage job before she is late. By the time Marisa has changed from her street clothes to her traditional maid's uniform, the audience has no doubt that she is working class.

At the beginning of each shift, the maid supervisor Paula Burns (Frances Conroy) holds a meeting with her staff to brief them on important happenings at the hotel. It is at this first meeting that Marisa learns that the hotel is searching for a new assistant manager. Marisa's coworker Stephanie encourages Marisa to apply because Marisa has told her in the past that she wants to be a manager. But Marisa rejects Stephanie's suggestion: "They are not gonna make a maid a manager." Stephanie coun-

ters with the promise of the American Dream, "Today is a new day, [and] anything is possible." When Stephanie asks Mr. Bextrum, the personnel manager, if a maid can apply, Bextrum replies, "Anything is possible." Thus, the film invokes the American Dream as the basis of the plot. This is a film about a young single mother who aspires to upward mobility in her profession.

The next scene shows that this film is also about class differences. As the maid meeting continues, Ms. Burns briefs the maids on the rich folks who will be checking in that day. As Burns explains each, the audience is shown these individuals in various vignettes. In listing the clients' needs, Burns also includes a litany of their problems. These rich guests' troubles include adultery, alcoholism, petty thievery, and indecent exposure by flashing the maids. Thus, the hardworking maids are juxtaposed with the immoral, wealthy patrons they serve. *Maid in Manhattan* squarely places itself on the side of the working class and does so by demonstrating the immorality and general silliness of the wealthy.

The movie furthers its class focus through several other scenes. One of note occurs when Marisa is running an errand for the wealthy but dizzily vapid Caroline Lane. Caroline is so pretentious that the hotel staff call her the "goddess in the Park suite." In the course of the errand, Marisa becomes angry at a store clerk who will not terminate a personal telephone call so that she can serve Marisa and a growing group of customers. Marisa takes the phone from the clerk and hangs it up. In a tirade, she says, "Being that I'm in kind of a rush . . . I'd say that you start serving your low-end customers because that's the only reason you are here, unless we are not good enough for you to service?" As in many of the other films I have analyzed, the film uses the language of social difference: in this case, Marisa refers to the "low-end" of the social structure to further a plot based on class difference.

Therefore, the first ten minutes of the film are devoted to the establishment of a class-related theme and a protagonist in search of the American Dream. At this point, the film turns its attention to the romantic comedy plot. Playboy politician Chris Marshall (Ralph Fiennes) has occupied a suite at the hotel while on a working visit to New York. In classic romantic comedy fashion, Stephanie and Marisa are

cleaning the goddess's room when Caroline asks Marisa to return some clothes to a designer fashion boutique as Caroline leaves. Stephanie realizes that Marisa and Caroline are the same size and demands that Marisa model the $5,000 suit that she is to return for Caroline. Marisa refuses, but Stephanie counters with "When are you or I ever going to get to try on a five-thousand [dollar] anything? Come on, feel how the other half feels." Marisa tries on the outfit and looks stunningly beautiful and upper class. Unlike her maid uniform or her street clothes, this suit highlights her attractive figure and shows that she is more beautiful than the goddess in the Park suite. Therefore, *Maid in Manhattan* continues an important class theme in the films I've investigated: the true difference between the classes is nothing more than style and fashion.

In typical romantic comedy fashion, Chris and Ty meet in the elevator; and Chris invites Ty to accompany him as he walks his dog, Rufus. Ty takes Chris to the room where he knows his mom is working, the Park suite, to ask her permission. Of course, when Ty and Chris arrive, there is no maid Marisa there; instead, Chris meets a beautiful upper-class woman. Stephanie completes the case of mistaken identity by speaking to Marisa as if she is the goddess living in the Park suite, Caroline Lane. As Ty, Chris, and Marisa/Caroline all go for a walk, the audience realizes that this group must somehow form a family before the movie ends because they are clearly made for each other. Ty and Chris share a love for Republicans, politics, and speeches. Marisa loves the way that Chris treats Ty, and there seems to be some romantic spark for this wealthy playboy prince of politics. Chris is smitten with Marisa as a beautiful, rich, and intelligent woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. For example, Chris invites Marisa to the $2500-a-plate benefit for inner-city schools and explains that he has to attend because he needs to suck up to a political adversary. Marisa responds that if they gave the $2500 to the inner city schools and ate more cheaply, they could do some real good for the children in the schools. But, more importantly, Marisa tells Chris, "You shouldn't have to serve yourself up no matter what the cause." In a later exchange, Chris and his assistant, Jerry, explain that they are on their way to the Bronx so that Chris can make a speech on housing projects. Marisa is obviously irritated by the idea and says, "You're telling

people in the Bronx about the projects? Maybe you both should spend some real time in the Bronx." Jerry suggests that as a wealthy woman, she does not understand the Bronx's working class either. But Marisa counters with "I grew up there. I lived in a four-block radius my whole life." As they part, Chris is obviously infatuated with Marisa and says to Jerry, "She isn't like anyone I've ever met before, and she's no phony." This frank honesty, coupled with her beauty, attracts Chris to Marisa in a way that no woman has attracted him in the past.

Of course, Chris cannot rid his thoughts of the beautiful goddess in the Park suite; so he asks Lionel, his hotel butler, to leave a handwritten lunch invitation addressed to Caroline in the Park suite. The real Caroline Lane finds the note and is so excited that this rich politician wants to have lunch with her that she shows up ready for anything. Chris is shocked to find this characterless blonde in his room instead of his brunette goddess and is convinced that he must find his Caroline. This scene sets up the rivalry between Caroline and Marisa for Chris's affections that will inevitably lead to Marisa's unmasking as a maid and the end to her dreams of becoming a manager. In this way, *Maid in Manhattan* recalls the rivalry between Tess and Katherine for Jack and reduces this to an individual fight between two women over a man, instead of addressing the class differences that the film has invoked as important. Lionel, originally confused, later makes the connection between Ty and Chris and figures out that Marisa was Chris's intended lunch date.

At this point, I could forgive the movie if it dropped Marisa's dream to become a manger and focused on its Cinderella tale. I think that the audience would easily forget about all the manager talk as they hone in on the individual conflict between the two women over this prince of a man. But the film overtly refuses to ignore Marisa's dream to become a manager. Marisa is called into Mr. Bextrum's office and told that she will receive an accelerated six-week training period to become the next assistant manager. He encourages her to accept by saying, "When life shuts one door it opens a window. So jump." Therefore, after invoking a classic Cinderella love story, the movie explicitly returns to its American Dream theme.

Marisa is angry with her friend Stephanie when she realizes that Stephanie has turned in a manger application for her. Marisa confronts Stephanie, who inspires Marisa by saying, "These are the golden years. We got to prove our mothers wrong. Don't waste them." Stephanie's remark refers to the fact that Marisa's mom, Veronica, believes that Marisa should stop dreaming of becoming a manager and instead accept her social position as a maid. But Marisa refuses because she says that she wants to make something of her life; her dream is to be a manager.

At Chris's bidding, Jerry arranges for Marisa to be at the benefit ball by giving butler Lionel an invitation for the mysterious rich woman that Chris desires. When Lionel delivers the invitation to Marisa, he sternly asks her, "Are you serious about management?" When Marisa responds affirmatively, Lionel says, "Then I suggest that you go to the Met tonight and end all association with Chris Marshall." He pauses for effect and continues, "At least until you are manager, and then you can make your own rules." Lionel smiles, hugs Marisa, and gives her the invitation.

Marisa is excited about the ball but is sad because she is going to break off her budding romance with Chris as it endangers her manager position. In a scene with her fellow maids, Marisa laments the fact that she cannot continue to see Chris: "There was just something different about him." One maid responds, "Yeah, money!" Marisa protests that the attraction was more than money and that they both felt the connection. The maids remind her that she cannot be in love with him, or vice versa, because they have nothing in common. One maid offers the succinct argument, "You're from different worlds." The maids argue that Marisa has to break it off with Chris because "You can be a manager." Another maid looks up and says, "Imagine, one of us out there!" Marisa finally relents to the collective dream of her as maid messiah but reminds the group of the material realities: "I don't have anything to wear" to the ball. Stephanie counters with "It ain't what you got; it's who you know and what they got." Thus, the movie returns to its Cinderella plot with the maids and their ilk acting as Marisa's fairy godmothers.

Non-diegetically, the Diana Ross hit "I'm Coming Out" surges up as the maids dance around; and the scene cuts to a montage of Marisa shopping in upscale boutiques, with fittings of various high-priced

gowns, receiving jewelry, shoes, and hairstyling as she is swept from store to store with the help of her maid friends. Diana Ross's stirring vocals ring out in an abbreviated version of her song:

I'm coming out
I want the world to know
I got to let it show

There's a new me coming out
And I just had to live
And I wanna give
I'm completely positive
I think this time around
I am gonna do it
Like you never knew it
Ooh, I'll make it through

The time has come for me
To break out of the shell
I have to shout
That I'm coming out!

The scene ends with a dazzling Harry Winston necklace that Ty remarks "is worth more than I'll see in ten lifetimes." Of course, all of this is on loan; and like the Cinderella prototype, Marisa will return to her old self after this magical night. Only in this tale, Cinderella does not need a fairy godmother because she has working-class friends with connections in all the best stores. As her supportive and loving working-class coworkers see the transformed Marisa off in her black limo, Marisa confesses to Stephanie, "This is all a lie." But Stephanie counters with what the audience already believes: "No, honey, it's more like a dream. For one night you are living it for all of us.... Tonight the maid is the lie and this is who you really are." The dream has been realized in the film, and the audience knows that the goddess in the Park suite really is the maid who cleans it.

The real Caroline is also at the ball and is intrigued by the beautiful interloper who has Chris's attention. She approaches Marisa briefly in a

vain attempt to learn her identity and in the process comments on Marisa's gorgeous Harry Winston necklace. Marisa is beautiful and captures Chris's heart completely, but Marisa tells Chris that she will never see him again. Chris reluctantly agrees, but only after they spend one passionate night in his hotel room. Early the next morning, the real Caroline sees Marisa, now in street clothes, leaving Chris's room. Without the wealthy accoutrements she wore to the ball, Caroline easily recognizes Marisa as her maid wearing a Harry Winston necklace. Caroline goes to Bextrum, and they identify Marisa on the security tapes. In so doing, they also see footage of Marisa in the $5,000 outfit. Caroline calls Chris in so that he will know that he has been duped by a dishonest maid, and Bextrum fires Marisa. Chris admonishes Caroline for her meanness, but the audience realizes that her comeuppance is a hollow victory compared to Marisa's loss of her American Dream.

Lionel approaches Marisa as she is leaving the hotel and explains that he has quit his butler job:

> Sometimes we are forced in directions that we ought to have found for ourselves. . . . [Remember, the rich] are only people with money. We only serve them. We are not their servants. What we do . . . does not define who we are. What defines us is how we rise after falling. I think you'll make a wonderful manager someday.

Thus, Lionel keeps both halves of the American Dream alive.

Marisa has only temporarily failed as a result of her unethical behavior. Her immoral act is to further the case of mistaken identity with Chris by overtly and intentionally going to the fancy-dress ball as an upper-class imposter. She knows that this ruse is wrong but allows her own desires and those of her friends to convince her that one night as Cinderella is okay. But it is not; it makes her a phony. Chris and the audience are attracted to her for her honesty and integrity. In fact, Chris even remarks to his associate that Marisa is not phony. However, the audience can easily forgive Marisa this one fault. Much like Tess in *Working Girl*, the audience sees Marisa's subterfuge as basically harmless.

Since she is a moral candidate, Lionel's advice points out that all she has to do is stick to the tenets of the American Dream; and she will someday achieve it. Back at her apartment, Marisa's mother, Veronica, knows of her termination and tells Marisa that she must contact a friend who can give her a job cleaning people's houses. But Marisa argues, "I don't want to clean houses. There's nowhere to go from there." Veronica challenges Marisa's dreams of upward mobility: "Do you want to end up back in the projects? [Then] keep dreaming dreams that will never happen." Marisa is resolute in her belief in the American Dream for all people. "I'm going to find a job as a maid in some hotel . . . and when I get a chance to be a manager . . . I'm gonna take that chance." Thus, the film has swung fully back to its original story of upward mobility. The romance with Chris is over, and Marisa is back to her life and her dream of becoming a manager. In many ways, the film should end here. Cinderella went to the fancy-dress ball, and now she is back in the real world where she is recognized as a moral working-class woman who refuses to allow the unfair social system and the pretentious rich jerks to break her spirit. According to the American Dream, Marisa will overcome this setback and will succeed, but not in this movie.

Unfortunately, the movie does not end with this moral lesson but returns to its romantic plot. Months later, Ty skips school and goes to a Chris Marshall press conference that just happens to be held at the hotel where Marisa is now a maid. After his speech, Ty asks Chris if everyone deserves a second chance and leads Chris into the bowels of the hotel, with a host of reporters in pursuit, where he finds Marisa in the break room. Interestingly, the break room is adorned with a mural of the New York City skyline, echoing the opening sequence of the film. Chris kisses Marisa, dressed in her maid uniform, and asks if they can start over, "You as you and me as me?" A reporter asks Chris, "You two got a chance?" Chris smiles while making an "I don't know" shrug. The omission of an overtly positive response on Chris's part speaks volumes. Really, what is going on here? Is this a story of failed upward mobility or is it a Cinderella tale?

However, these subtle plot points are forced aside as "I'm Coming Out" once again booms non-diegetically, and the film presents an inter-

esting montage of magazine covers that seem to be an effort to reconcile all the plot points. The first is a cover that features Marisa and Chris with the headline "Will they make it?" The next is a *Newsweek* cover of Chris with the title "Politics and the Working Class." The last is a cover of *New York* magazine with a picture of Chris and Marisa and, next to it the title, "The ex-maid and the senator, one year later and still going strong." Of course, it is not clear exactly where they are going or the nature of their relationship. The final cover implies that the two of them are romantically involved. Since there is no mention of a marriage and no incluion of Ty in this shot, it is obviously not about domestic bliss. There is no reason to think that Marisa has fulfilled her dream of becoming a hotel manager, especially since a year later she is only referred to as the ex-maid. There is certainly enough ambiguity to suggest that the Cinderella fairytale has come true, at least for a year, which may make this movie the most realistic view of that tired story in its history.

But the American Dream has not been fulfilled. Marisa is a moral candidate and worked hard to achieve her goal; but in the end, the phony goddess in the Park suite ended her chance at upward mobility. It is sad, really, because Caroline was not even a worthy adversary, as Katherine was for Tess and Gekko was to Bud Fox. Furthermore, Caroline's stupidity and general worthlessness dull any victory that the audience can feel for Marisa's final triumph. The truth is that Caroline never had a chance with Chris, and so she was not a worthy adversary. The final analysis is that Marisa failed at upward mobility, but not because she was immoral, as were Bud Fox and Mitch McDeere, but because she got caught faking it. Her only misstep was the pretense as the goddess in the Park suite. In fact, Chris was wrong when he told Jerry that Marisa was not a phony. Although her convictions were her own, her $5,000 suit persona was a sham because she was pretending to be a rich woman. Luckily for her, she maintained her working-class values even in disguise and allowed her true beauty to show though and capture Chris's heart. Unlike Tess, who is forced to take on a different persona, Marisa chooses to carry on the subterfuge and does so for selfish reasons. This is most obvious when Ty argues for Chris to give Marisa a second chance, accentuating her need for his forgiveness, and when

Chris suggests that they must start over as their real selves. Marisa fakes it for selfish reasons; and like Dave in *Breaking Away,* she must fail in her quest for upward mobility.

In a way, that is the virtue of this movie's troubled plot. Implicitly, the film suggests that hardworking and moral maids in Manhattan cannot escape their desperate lives unless they are attractive to a millionaire senator. They can dream the American Dream, but they cannot achieve it. Ultimately, Marisa is saved from her plight as a poor maid; but she does not achieve the American Dream—this movie is about her failed attempt. Her savior is a rich, upper-class politician, but for how long? The movie offers no long-term romantic resolution and actually questions it with the magazine reference to the limited time span of one year. It would have been very easy to show a magazine cover with Marisa in a bridal gown, signaling a happily-ever-after conclusion. Instead, this film ends ambiguously with a shrug, a smile, and a song from the 1970s. Perhaps this is an implicit nod to the economic realities facing poor maids in America and the fact that real social forces cannot be overcome with hard work and good morals.

Good Will Hunting

Good Will Hunting, like *Breaking Away,* is another Oscar-winning film of adolescent passage infused with class issues. This film, however, is an interesting case not because it is another example of failed mobility, but rather of refused mobility. In this case, the protagonist's refusal of mobility reinforces the morality theme of this chapter.

Will Hunting (Matt Damon) is a troubled young genius from a predominately Irish working-class neighborhood of South Boston. This Southey is a rare intellectual who can understand and use practically any information, knowledge, proof, equation, idea, or argument after only one reading, despite having no formal higher education. Instead, he educates himself at a doctoral level by reading books at his local public library. In a particularly telling scene, he confronts a pretentious Harvard graduate student at a bar. The Harvard man is trying to make Will's best friend, Chuckie, appear ignorant and boorish to two young women.

Will intercedes and asks the graduate student if he has ever had an original thought. As a result, the two men engage in a heated argument that consists of critiques of early colonial political economies and insults. Will gets the better of his opponent by quoting both the book and the page that the grad student plagiarizes in his verbal attack. Then Will insults him by insinuating that the graduate student is dumb: "You drop 150 thousand dollars for an education you could get for a buck-fifty at the public library?" The young man pretentiously responds that he will have a Harvard degree, financial success, and social respect, while Hunting will be forced to work in a fast-food restaurant. Will's retort is, "[A]t least I won't be unoriginal." Therefore, early in this film, Will establishes the moral high ground by attacking an elitist educational system that favors the wealthy by refusing to make Ivy League education, and its rewards, available to all. This crucial scene sets up two of the most important conflicts that will occur. First, it demonstrates Will's superior knowledge and introduces the idea that intellectual success should not be measured by financial rewards. Second, it is the occasion of Will's meeting with Skylar (Minnie Driver), an Ivy League coed and the plot's romantic interest.

Will and Skylar are a cross-class relationship. Skylar is a fairly well-adjusted British graduate student whose father has died, leaving her a comfortable inheritance that she uses to pursue her educational goals. That Will is a poor Southey makes no difference to Skylar, but affects Will. Unlike many of the upper-class people in the movie, Skylar does not behave in a snobbish or elitist manner; therefore, the audience can embrace Skylar as a likable partner for Will. Like Claire in *Someone to Watch Over Me*, Skylar is an appealing upper-class character whom the audience easily likes.

Will's intelligence goes unnoticed by most people. He is happy to remain an undiscovered genius; but eventually, he gives himself away while working as a janitor at MIT. Mathematics Professor Lambeau places several difficult theorems on a hallway chalkboard as exercises for his gifted students. Will anonymously solves the theorems correctly to the astonishment of professors and students alike. Lambeau accidentally catches the janitor solving one of the problems and tries to approach

him, but Will nimbly sneaks away. Lambeau finds Will by contacting the facilities supervisor, who directs the professor to Will's parole officer. These scenes establish important points for the audience. First, they squarely locate Will in a working-class, if not working-poor, job as a janitor. Second, they demonstrate that Will's exceptional mathematical ability is far beyond that of even Harvard's best students. Finally, the scenes explicitly establish Will's troubled emotional state that leads to his violent tendencies.

Despite his brilliance and charisma, Will is both troubled and defiant. An orphan who grew up in abusive foster homes, Will is unable to keep a job and constantly has run-ins with the law. The cliché working-class signifiers stereotypically present Will and his three best friends as Irish American lads who enjoy drinking and fighting. Their macho code and caring-abusiveness are meant to portray a Hollywood version of adolescent working-class male bonding. Despite the testosterone-laden behavior, the men's relationship provides Will with a feeling of belonging; however, this working-class machismo is also designed to demonstrate to the audience that this relationship can neither stop Will's violent outbursts nor nurture his intellectual abilities.

For example, Will's fighting keeps him in legal trouble and threatens his freedom. In an early scene, Will and his mates attack a rival group of boys and beat them badly. When the police arrive, they try to subdue Will as he strikes one of the officers. Because of his long assault record, Will is sentenced to jail time; however, through Professor Lambeau's efforts, Will is released under two conditions. First, he will meet weekly with Lambeau, who will nurture his mathematical ability. Second, he will meet with a trained counselor for therapy to get help for his troubled emotional state.

It is this second requirement that sets up the most important relationship of the film. Will tears through a series of well-respected therapists, forcing them, through verbal attacks and embarrassing acts, to refuse to continue to meet with him. In a final effort to find a therapist who will treat Will, Lambeau goes to his old friend Sean (Robin Williams). Sean is different from the other therapists. Rather than having a high-priced practice, Sean teaches counseling at Bunker Hill Community College.

Furthermore, Sean is also a Southey and, therefore, has a unique insight into Will's background and a more down-to-earth therapeutic approach. The movie establishes the similarities between these two men in several scenes: they are both Southies, they drink fairly heavily, they both live in dumpy little apartments, and they are both very intelligent underachievers. Finally, they are both portrayed as men who need emotional and psychological healing.

Sean is emotionally troubled because of the slow and agonizingly painful death of his wife and soul mate, Nancy. His grief has left him reclusive and unwilling to start a new romantic relationship or to leave his lowly teaching job despite his lofty education and ability. Years of child abuse have left Will emotionally stunted and psychologically scarred. Therefore, Will and Sean are primed as catalysts for change in each other's lives. The audience realizes this as Will's sarcastic remark, "[L]et the healing begin," foretells the outcome of Will and Sean's relationship at their first meeting.

Will tries to drive Sean away with his usual verbal abuse after sensing that Sean is sensitive about his wife's memory. In doing so, Will is able to antagonize Sean by suggesting that Sean's wife had been unfaithful. But Sean is not an emotionally fragile therapist, and he is able to see through Will's macho pretense and agrees to continue helping Will. Sean explains his decision by pointing out that Will is "a cocky, scared shit-less kid." In this way, the audience can see that Sean's working-class upbringing clues him into the macho code of working-class male bravado. Where cultural elites may interpret Will's behavior as antagonistic, uncouth, and ill mannered, Sean is able to read Will's behavior as a misdirected plea for help.

Sean is able to reach Will partly because he gives tit-for-tat in all conflicts, including physical aggression. The two men establish an uneasy relationship that mimics the one-upmanship of the Southey masculine code. In this manner, Sean is eventually able to break through Will's emotional shield, and they begin a meaningful and productive talking cure. Interestingly, Sean's Ivy League education and working-class sensibility combine to break Will's resistance. Therefore, this film takes an explicit stance for social class value integration rather

than a clear preference for either class. Sean understands that Will can never be at peace until he learns to trust others. Sean asks, "Do you feel like you're alone, Will?" He questions, "[I]s there someone who touches your soul . . . do you have a soul mate?" Sean realizes that Will sees only "every negative thing ten miles down the road" rather than any honor, goodness, or love in life. Ansen explains, "[T]he brilliant, emotionally wounded hero must break through his protective shell to gain the capacity to love" (1998, 63). Will slowly accepts Sean and draws closer to him emotionally.

As the film unfolds, conflict develops between Lambeau and Will. Lambeau is concerned that underachiever Will is wasting his rare talents. The film compares this disappointment to Lambeau's criticism of Sean's professional decisions. Will is not interested in Lambeau's concerns with professional success and appearance. The very fact that Lambeau interprets Sean's life as a failure is indicative of Lambeau's preoccupation with all things related to external success. Thus, the two working-class characters are positioned on the moral high ground above and beyond Lambeau's shallow concern for the trappings of professional financial success. Will and Sean both search for moral good and communal integration over academic commendation or financial achievement.

Will lashes out and verbally assaults both Lambeau, who is his intellectual inferior, and Skylar, who openly loves Will and wants him to move with her to California. Sean knows that Will will never be able to find peace of mind or an honorable life direction until he is able to love and appreciate others. In the climax, Sean completely breaks through Will's defenses in a discussion of Will's abusive foster parents. During Will's emotional collapse, Sean repeats, "It's not your fault." Will cries uncontrollably and the two men embrace. Sean tells Will, "[Y]ou're a free man . . . you do what's in your heart son and you'll be fine . . . good luck, son." And thus, both men are healed. Will has challenged Sean enough that Sean has decided to take a leave of absence for traveling, writing, and perhaps a search for his new soul mate. Will is finally able to break free of South Boston and commit to a loving relationship. In the final scene, Will is driving to California to be with Skylar. The audience believes that Will has been freed from his emotional prison of

distrust and now understands, appreciates, tolerates, and has compassion for others.

The issues of social mobility are expressed in Sean's and Will's conflicts with Lambeau. Lambeau believes that both Sean and Will are failures because they refuse to use their unique intellectual abilities for financial and social gain. Lambeau is an intellectual who has lost his moral center. Further, Lambeau is unable to maintain his intellectual intensity because he has dulled his brilliance in the mundane pursuit of social success. Lambeau believes that Sean is a failure because he teaches at a community college when he should pursue financial and social gain via his intelligence. Likewise, Lambeau encourages Will to use his intelligence for financial gain. But Will is neither motivated to be an Ivy League professor nor a highly paid math genius. Therefore, Will undermines the job interview that Lambeau arranges for him with the National Security Administration. Will refuses the job because it might betray a fellow working-class person. This rejection is an overt attack on Lambeau's belief that intellectual ability should be used for personal financial gain; any use short of this is failure.

In this film, social mobility is tempting to Will; but he refuses the enticement. Instead, the film pushes mobility aside to favor the values of self-acceptance and love for others. It is interesting that, in the end, moving on is literally the solution for both Will and Sean, as Sean takes a sabbatical to travel and Will leaves Boston to go to California with Skylar. The motives for social mobility are secondary to the priorities of emotional well-being, personal integrity, and social integration. The important point is that the values related to social mobility are addressed and rhetorically purified. Lambeau's shallow, superficial values are debunked; and the appropriate values of Fisher's moral and material myths are embraced. In this fashion, *Good Will Hunting* reinforces the morality of this chapter's other films and is reminiscent of Tony's transformation in *Saturday Night Fever*. Will, like Tony, does not fail at upward mobility as much as he refuses pretentious motives. In doing so, Will and Tony are both poised for successful attempts at the American Dream; and the proper motives are once again communicated to a willing audience.

The Morality of Failed Mobility

Since the 1980s, the working class has been assaulted by economic policies and political agendas that have successfully forced many Americans into living below or precariously close to the poverty level. The dismantling of traditional working-class jobs through downsizing, coupled with the profit-driven greed of American manufacturing corporations that have moved their plants to countries with cheaper labor costs, have turned many Americans to service-sector jobs that are part time, low paying, and without necessary job benefits. This situation brought several cities and counties to pass living wage laws that require companies doing business with the municipalities to pay their workers a living wage, partially to relieve local governments from the burden of an overly large group of citizens living in poverty. Employment statistics show that millions of people are unemployed, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau estimate millions more are unemployed but uncounted. Millions more are working part-time but looking for full-time jobs. Finally, like Marisa in *Maid in Manhattan,* millions of Americans work at full-time service jobs but earn a wage below the poverty line.

During the 1980s there was very little actual mobility in the American middle class, with over 60 percent of Americans experiencing no actual increase in income, while the concentration of wealth increased among the wealthiest Americans ("And the rich got richer," 1992, 139–41). These negative trends continue. The average American family works more hours each week to maintain their lifestyle, an average that is equal to approximately six extra weeks of work over a year, while the income disparity between the haves and the have-nots continues to grow. The top 1 percent of stock owners control approximately half of all stocks, and almost 35 percent of all income gains went to the top 1 percent of families in the years from 1989 to 1998 (Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 2001). This is the zero-sum game of contemporary American social order. The 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s have offered little real change for the middle class, working class, working poor, and the poverty stricken in the United States. Thus, this is the socioeconomic context in

which recent Hollywood films counsel the public to accept the morally superior but economically inferior identity of working-class status.

With their paychecks shriveling, their hours shrinking from full time to part time, their inability to survive without two incomes, and the almost constant threat of downsizing or the elimination of their jobs, it is amazing that the majority of Americans still cling to the myth of the American Dream. Why do they do so? The pervasiveness and flexibility of class ideology make it possible for Americans to both realize that they are structurally hampered by an unfair society and also believe that success and failure is individually determined in the United States. While the corporate and political rhetoric of the past decades focused on mobility, social critics pointed to diminished expectations as the cause for people's fundamental dissatisfaction and frustration. It is telling, therefore, to find a group of films that support the morality that being economically disadvantaged is the moral high ground. This Hollywood version of a "blessed are the poor" philosophy may well be seen to constitute a rhetorical argument for the diminished expectations most Americans are facing and the material realities they experience.

This chapter's motion pictures warn against attempting mobility with the wrong motives, primarily selfish ones such as greed. They communicate that upward mobility for the wrong reasons is immoral and unethical and will not lead to the rewards of the American Dream but to certain unhappiness. The protagonists of these stories are not themselves iniquitous, as their antagonists often are, but are misled by immoral motives. Therefore, their attempt at upward mobility must fail and they must realize through a conversion experience that they have erred from the path of their ethical working-class value system. They must return to that system and do what they can to set things right, after which they may again attempt upward mobility with the proper motives and the assurance of success if they desire.

These films support a working-class ethic that values the longstanding requirements of the American Dream. They present ambition as conflicting with the moral superiority of accepting one's social rank and status and embracing working-class values. These include hard work, perseverance, selflessness, and, above all, a strong ethical moral center.

Efforts to short-circuit this route are foreordained to failure. Like Icarus, whose father warns him not to let his ambition ruin his wings, these people also fail. Therefore, these films suggest that success, upward mobility, wealth, and power are not innately bad or to be shunned but are the proper rewards of the American Dream. In keeping with the complex ideology of class in the United States, this lesson teaches that the combination of working-class values and upper-class privilege are desirable but carry a strong warning against attempting class mobility in an improper way or for the wrong reasons. This chapter's movies test their characters and find them lacking, so the protagonists must experience a personal conversion that reveals the fundamental virtues of the combined myths of the American Dream. Further, the lesson is imbued with a serious moral warning against hubris, unchecked ambition, greed, and selfishness.

Moreover, these films suggest that many of the problems that face working Americans are the result of greedy people, like Gekko, instead of the socioeconomic forces that encourage corporate greed. The movies spell out the price that Americans have paid for the immoral leadership and greedy selfishness of villainous men of power. Further, they admonish the good people of America, the Bud Foxes and Mitch McDeeres, not to be seduced by the power and privilege of the immoral for their own sake and the sake of their loved ones. These films criticize, to varying degrees, the values and morality of greed. Their rhetoric argues against shallow, capitalist, and non-humanitarian values. Yet, the films also communicate a message of class acceptance. Instead of moralizing mobility, the unique contribution of these movies is to urge viewers to accept their working-class status as the moral high ground.

Class Acceptance

The rhetoric of class acceptance dissuades fears that America is, in fact, a class-based society and assuages arguments that race, class, and gender deny most Americans the American Dream. This is the fundamental rhetoric of diminished expectations. In 1979, when *Breaking Away* was released, the recession made things look bad for the working class; but

the rest of the late twentieth century would make them look hopeless. It is significant that these motion pictures valorize the morality of the economically disadvantaged. They suggest that the selfish pursuit of mobility is both corrupt and destructive. Even as the economic conditions brought basically no income gains to the majority of Americans, the rich got richer and the poor more impoverished. The United States led all other industrial countries in the gap between the haves and the have-nots, wages were reduced or stagnated, and middle- and low-income families became worse off economically (Braun 1991; Ehrenreich 1990; Phillips 1990; Rothenberg 1992).

Despite these overwhelming structural inequalities, Americans maintain a belief in the American Dream. The rhetoric of the movies attests to the importance of individual class acceptance over and above upward mobility. The history of film brings to light two major themes of upward mobility: the naive success myth and the ironic success myth (Kleinhans 1985). As Kleinhans explains, the

> function of the myth in American life is to encourage hope and a belief in individual opportunity. . . . The myth promises to those who lack money, educational advantages and influence—the vast majority of Americans—that a personality committed to ambition, determination, perseverance, temperance and hard work will earn its appropriate reward. (1985, 66)

In these motion pictures, the ironic myth is reformulated with the rhetoric of class acceptance and diminished expectations. Further, the immorality of some upper-class people is emphasized. Therefore, the American Dream is left virtually unscathed in favor of a message of class acceptance as these films counsel contentment with the moral high ground of the working-class life. In light of the monumental socioeconomic losses the middle and working classes have suffered in the United States, it is imperative that the cinematic mythos of class focus on the ironic class myth, or it would surely have to suggest social reform as the collective therapy of America in the early twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 4

Moralizing the Material

In *Pretty Woman* (1990), super-rich Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) literally buys good-hearted prostitute Vivian Morse (Julia Roberts) to be his beck-and-call girl for one week. During that week, he takes her to a polo match where many of his acquaintances and business partners are in attendance. After meeting a few of the pretentious and unlikable group, Vivian asks, "Are these people your friends?" Edward admits that they are; and Vivian says as an aside, "No wonder you came looking for me."

In this chapter, I look at films that are less overtly concerned with upward mobility than the movies in chapters two and three, but nonetheless make class a central plot point. In general, all of the films in this chapter illustrate four critical observations that are important to the American Dream in contemporary Hollywood cinema. First, the films make the audience keenly aware of their characters' class membership. Second, the movies share a prevalent attitude that presumes that upper-class people are unenviable and that lower-class people are more desirable as friends and companions (as the polo scene in *Pretty Woman* indicates). Third, in each film, the upper-class character needs emotional help that cannot be provided by his or her peers. Finally, both the lower-class and upper-class characters benefit from the cross-class relationship.

The central difference between this group of films and the movies in previous chapters is their focus on an emotionally injured or malicious upper-class character in desperate need of help. For example, *Pretty Woman* is a popular Cinderella story that evokes the longstanding fairy-tale romance between people separated by their class status, what Ross

(1998) calls a cross-class fantasy. This intrigue is often interpreted to be a working-class desire to gain wealth or social prestige via a relationship with an upper-class patron. However, there is much more to *Pretty Woman* than the story of the poor girl who meets a rich and charming prince. In the classic Cinderella tale, a beautiful but oppressed young woman is swept away from her hardship by Prince Charming. But Vivian's prince is not charming. As I will explain in detail, Edward is both unpleasant and terribly troubled. Although Edward takes Vivian away from her hard life as a street prostitute, Vivian saves Edward from his meaningless life.

In this chapter, I elucidate a theme whereby an upper-class character discovers true love, genuine beauty, moral substance, spiritual renewal, or lasting friendship through a relationship with a lower-class person. This theme deals with movies that are exclusively about cross-class relationships that benefit all parties. The relationships are often romantic, such as in *Pretty Woman, Titanic* (1997), *Mrs. Winterbourne* (1996), and *White Palace* (1990); but in films such as *Passion Fish* (1991) and *The Fisher King* (1991), the cross-class relationships are not sexual in nature. In each case, however, when people of a higher-class status become involved with those of lower status, all lives are changed for the better. Particularly, members of the higher status are moralized in their business and personal lives; overcome dark depression, spiritual despair, and physical ailments; and somehow discover the personal worth, true identities, and paths to happiness that previously escaped them. In other words, a strict comparison to the Cinderella story is flawed from the beginning because these princes or princesses are variously suicidal, despondent, unhappy, immoral, or just plain not charming.

There are two primary myths of class in American culture: the myth of a classless society and the myth of upward mobility, the American Dream. The concurrence of these two myths is a class conundrum: Americans wish to consider themselves without class identities and create a society where class does not exist (the huge all-encompassing middle-class myth is an example), yet at the same time they hold fast to the American Dream. The American Dream assures us that we can be upwardly mobile, acquire wealth and its benefits, and raise the social status of our families. This anomaly persists in stereotypic romantic dra-

mas such *Pretty Woman, Maid in Manhattan,* and *Working Girl*; but it also appears in more complicated films that portray a larger breadth of the human experience, as in *Passion Fish* and *The Fisher King.* We can understand the rich person's motives for wanting the substance and value offered by the lower-classed person; but if the materially better off are so unhappy and spiritually bankrupt, what is the lower-status person's motives for wanting a relationship with the upper-class person? This subtle motive is never clearly addressed and appears to be a foregone conclusion, the assumption being that a lower-class person is naturally attracted to the wealth and status of the higher-classed person. But this is an implicit assumption that is usually obscured by a direct plot device such as Edward paying Vivian $3,000 to stay with him for a week in *Pretty Woman.* In the plot, Vivian takes the job because she needs the money but slowly learns to love Edward during the course of the week, even though he is an unpleasant person.

Finally, the concept of a utopian classless society is illustrated or instantiated, while simultaneously the motive of upward mobility for the lower-class characters is permitted (though always with the moral proviso that one does not abandon one's personal and spiritual virtues in harvesting the rewards of living happily ever after). The result of this analysis is a partial picture of the complex ideology of class in American society, wherein the films argue that we can achieve classlessness in our relationships and also enjoy social mobility, as long as we understand that personal morality and individual substance are the higher values and the keys to personal happiness.

Pretty Woman

Films that involve cross-class relationships establish the class differences and struggles among characters in various ways. Often the American Dream of upward mobility becomes a kind of shorthand expression for the context of class-based motives and issues, as I have shown in chapters two and three. However, *Pretty Woman* does this by using the general premise that underlies Cinderella-type tales, but also by using the actual language of aspiring for a better life through dreams. The film opens

with a street prophet yelling out "What's your dream?" and ends with the same man announcing that "some dreams come true, some don't. Keep on dreaming." Vivian states that her dream is to have the fairytale. She wishes to be carried away from her life as a prostitute by a knight in shining armor and live happily ever after. She wishes to escape her present life and find true love with someone who can rescue her from her circumstances.

Vivian should not be mistaken for a foolish dreamer. She realizes the dissimilarity between her real life and her dream. Vivian knows the difference between her fairytale dream and her reality. As she explains to Barney, the helpful hotel manager, "You and me live in the real world most of time." That world is an unpleasant lower-class reality. Vivian understands that she must make a living as a prostitute but yearns for a better life. She dreams an impractical fairytale, but she does so in a practical way. That is, she dreams of meeting the Mr. Right who will love her and have the resources to help her escape her life.

In this way, *Pretty Woman* works its cross-class relationship into a narrative framework that intertwines the desire for upward mobility with a Cinderella story that promises Vivian her true love and a better life. As I suggested in chapter two, a processual analysis of social class construction takes shape around the lived experiences of the characters; and *Pretty Woman* is replete with dichotomous signifiers of class and social status. Vivian and Kit's place on Hollywood Boulevard is inhabited by prostitutes, drug dealers, murderers, drug addicts, pimps, homeless people, and curious visitors. Edward's world is inhabited by lawyers, corporate executives, limo drivers, waiters, doormen, elevator operators, 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, she rides the bus, her meals are snacks from street vendors and stolen fruit garnish from the corner bar, and she must solicit johns on a street corner. In Edward's rarified space, he lives alone (or at least lonely), the hotel manager is very helpful, shopkeepers enjoy sucking up, he dines on expensive cuisine that he usually does not eat, he sleeps in penthouses where he suffers insomnia, rides in limos, goes to posh high-rise conference meetings, and works constantly. In short, Vivian and

Edward are worlds apart. In no way do their worlds ever meet, even though they geographically live in the same area.

When Vivian is taken into Edward's realm, she is transported to another world. Vivian and Edward meet only through a fated accident that allows Vivian access to the upper class. Once there, she and Edward connect in both physical and emotional ways and establish their cross-class relationship. Edward removes Vivian from her environment and gives her access to his upper-class circle. She attends a polo match, plays chess in a limo, attends her first opera, dines in chic restaurants, and shops on Rodeo Drive. These settings function not only to show Vivian and Edward interacting in his elite surroundings, but they provide incongruent humor by placing a working-class prostitute in an unfamiliar upper-class culture. Since she does not know the proper behavior for these situations, 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. More importantly though, Vivian may look out of place through all of these scenes; but the pretentious people that surround her are witless and rude. These unlikable one-dimensional snobs aid the audience in seeing Vivian as an engaging person who is a more desirable companion than all the rich folks who surround her.

Each of these filmic elements may serve various functions, and they are arranged so that the audience is invited to compare and contrast Vivian's and Edward's two very different worlds. Differences in the environs and experiences of these two characters provide a shorthand method of communicating their respective class affiliations in terms of economic stratifications and high-brow versus low-brow cultures. This iconic shorthand 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 two's class differences, their needs and hopes, and sees the benefits that the cross-class relationship offers both.

The significance of their relationship is expressed in 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 interacts with his lawyer, Philip (Jason Alexander), who repeatedly speaks of himself as Edward's friend both to Edward and to others. Yet Edward is a loner and treats Philip as an employee. In fact, Edward treats almost everyone as an employee. Edward's emotional distance is the result of the inability of his peers to break through Edward's psychological guard; thus, they are unable to help him overcome his relationship problems. Their inability to reach Edward emotionally causes interpersonal disasters. For example, Edward's wife divorced him; and his lover leaves him at the beginning of the film. Their common complaint is that Edward is emotionally and physically removed from his interpersonal relationships. The proof is that both women complain that they talk to Edward's secretary more than to him. In fact, when Edward's ex-wife remarries, Edward's secretary is her maid-of-honor, signaling their close relationship.

Vivian, however, can and does reach Edward because she is special. Edward and others note her exceptionality. Edward remarks to Vivian early on their first night together that "very few people surprise me," but she does. Barney, the hotel manager, refers to her as an "intriguing young lady"; and the president of a shipbuilding firm tells her that he enjoys her company. Part of Vivian's singular nature is her ability to treat people well without seeming phony or insincere. She seems genuinely able to accept people on their own merits. Vivian embodies Fisher's moralistic myth, as she has a "true regard for dignity and worth of each and every individual" (1973, 161).

Therefore, Vivian treats Edward differently than his peers do. He is obviously attracted to her beauty, but he also responds to her nurturing. Her ability to make Edward feel better is shown as Edward's cold demeanor warms during their week together. Vivian reaches Edward in several ways. For example, she is brutally honest when they are discussing his business dealings. 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 point is made even more significant because Vivian's honesty is contrasted with Philip's. When Edward remarks that he and Philip don't make anything, Phillip responds, "[W]e make money." Philip's remark is meant to suggest that the immoral ends justify the unethical means. As in the chapter three films, Vivian is shown as the morally superior working-class character in the midst of upper-class immorality.

Further, Vivian offers Edward experiences that differ from those in his usual life. She convinces him to walk barefoot in the park and even take a day off. In a touching scene, she bathes him lovingly as he describes his parents and his anger toward his dad. During this scene, he admits to spending $10,000 on 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 managed. Slowly, Edward changes from uptight and somber to happy and carefree. Philip sums up the obvious concerning Edward's dramatic change: "I wonder if this girl isn't the difference?"

However, Vivian's friends do not meet her needs, either. Kit is the only one of Vivian's friends with whom the audience is acquainted. Kit is certainly likable enough, unlike Edward's peers; but early in the film she squanders their rent money on party drugs. This stereotype reinforces the belief that many poor and economically struggling people deserve their fate. Braun explains that "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" (1991, 15). Hence, personal failures, such as the irresponsible use of rent money, become a damning media stereotype that reinforces incorrect beliefs about the poor. Yet Vivian does not fit into Kit's self-perpetuating cycle of failure. Vivian's down-to-earth philosophy and working-class value system aid in her ability to interact with Edward not only sexually, but also as a 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 her nurturing ways, thereby

liberating him from his physical ailments, lack of sleep and appetite, as well as his emotional malaise and inability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships.

Edward is healed by his interaction with Vivian and, through that process, becomes a caring, happy person and an ethical business partner who wants to produce rather than destroy. In short, Edward overcomes his social dysfunction, personal unhappiness, and unethical business practices because of his involvement with Vivian. Edward's greedy material excess is blatantly moralized (made decent and socially acceptable) as he decides to quit his corporate raiding and marry Vivian, thus fulfilling her dream. In the end, Edward is healed and Vivian is rescued. The social structures that kept them apart are variously ignored, thwarted, bridged, and subverted. Their romance overcomes the problems that Edward and Vivian face alone. Their joining is their path to happiness.

Significantly, Edward's emotional and psychological transformation is enabled by his relationship with Vivian. Edward agonizes about his hatred for his deceased father, finds it impossible to maintain a close relationship, has trouble sleeping, suffers from lack of appetite, and engages in unethical business practices. By the end of his week with Vivian, his recovery is evident as he sleeps, eats, talks about his emotional pain, learns to love and care for Vivian, cuts ties with immoral business associates, and invests his money in saving a company so that he can be an industrial producer rather than a corporate raider. Edward is transformed, moralized, and physically and psychologically healed through his interaction with Vivian. Edward gets a new lease on life.

Vivian's dream requires that she be both rescued from her situation and find true love; thus, her dream is a romantic one but also involves upward mobility. It is worth pointing out that Vivian rejects Edward's offers of material comfort as his mistress. Vivian would rather continue living her life as a prostitute and maintain her dream in its pure form than just opt for material comfort. Despite her criminal occupation, Vivian is a moral person. She stands ethically head and shoulders above Edward's phony and unlikable friends. She does not just want material comfort; she wants the romantic dream and is willing to leave Edward and search for it elsewhere. But Edward realizes his mistake and, in the

final scenes, becomes the knight in the shining limo that rescues Vivian from her working-class life.

The film's rhetoric illustrates the basic dynamics of social order. It does not picture an egalitarian society, but a heavily stratified America 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. The film communicates the idea that social order is not rigid or fixed, but is something that can be ruptured and ameliorated. 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's failure to achieve his or her goals is personal failure. In *Pretty Woman*, 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.

Pogrebin states that "all other class problems seem to pale beside the ambivalence and guilt surrounding the issue of cross-class friendships" (1987, 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" (1987, 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. As Pogrebin explains, "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 . . . [but] class [is] taboo [in America]" (1987,

150). In *Pretty Woman*, an America divided by class is rhetorically joined through a reassuring, calming, and healing view of the United States because it shows that the structural inequalities can be undone on the individual level.

Perhaps even more persuasive is the view of the world outside the cross-class relationship. The immoral upper class form materially rich but morally bankrupt relationships. They live sorry lives of meaningless excess and enjoy no real love or caring. Poorer characters who do not enter into the harmonious cross-class relationships are represented as the bungled and botched of society, the homeless, and drug addicted; and colorful Hollywood stereotypes of their real-life counterparts, who, even when presented as comic relief, are nonetheless undesirable. Only the cross-class union finds morality, emotional happiness, and economic well-being.

The popularity and success of cross-class fantasy films suggest that the movies are popular adherents to the American Dream, a myth that many Americans cherish and that aids them in understanding their own identities and their relationship to others. As Fisher explains, the functions of the dual myths of the American Dream "are to provide meaning, identity, a comprehensive understandable image of the world and to support the social order" (1973, 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.

Pretty Woman, like most cross-class romantic films, communicates that class conflicts can be overcome through true love. That is, these films create a 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 1991, 9). Individual personal failure is the only option open to most Americans as an explanation for their failure to achieve upward mobility because social class cannot be seriously considered an explanation 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" (1987, 144). Since Americans have no commonly accepted way to talk about issues of social class in a meaningful way, they must use the language that is socially accepted. That socially sanctioned language is framed in terms of the American Dream myths.

In *Pretty Woman*, the economic conditions that divide the U.S. population are reduced to the problems of individual characters and are solved through a cross-class relationship. The result is that the gulf existing 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.

In the end, rich and successful Edward is spiritually renewed and uses his money to produce rather than to destroy. He sweeps Vivian off the floor of her low-class apartment and carries her away in his limo. Vivian personifies the values of compassion, charity, tolerance, and a regard for the self-worth of others from the beginning of the movie, a moralistic value system that transforms Edward. Together they are the symbolic union of the two myths of the American Dream. As they drive away, the street prophet's dream 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 both characters are saved and rescue the dream of a classless American society along with them.

Mrs. Winterbourne

A rich man and a working-class woman are also the focus in Richard Benjamin's 1996 film *Mrs. Winterbourne*, the third remake of *I Married a Dead Man*. The repetitive use of this story makes it an interesting film to investigate because it is a frequently recurring Hollywood cross-class fantasy. The plot is fairly simple. A young, pregnant, working-class woman, Connie Doyle (Ricki Lake), is kicked out by her abusive lover and left to fend for herself on New York's mean streets. By chance, she ends up on the same train as wealthy newlyweds, Hugh and Patricia Winterbourne, who are on their way to visit his family, where Patricia will meet his relatives for the first time. In a tragic train wreck, the newlyweds are killed; and the unconscious Connie is mistaken for the deceased Patricia by the authorities.

Comatose Connie is brought into the wealthy Winterbourne family as Patricia. Once she recovers, Connie reluctantly goes along with the case of mistaken identity for the sake of her newborn. Although she is uneasy in her masquerade and not welcomed by Hugh's brother, she maintains the ruse for the sake of her child. Connie realizes that if she does not stay with the Winterbournes, her child will be homeless. Her love for her child is so great that she cannot bear the thought of her child living in the street; therefore, she does not deny that she is Patricia.

Connie masquerades as the well-born Patricia in the culturally elite world of the Winterbournes. Unlike Tess in *Working Girl*, who chooses to assume the role of an imposter, fate thrusts Connie into her position. Connie must adapt to the upper-class lifestyle with no knowledge of their culture, but Connie has Patricia's clothes. Eventually Hugh's mother, Grace Winterbourne (Shirley MacLaine), chooses a more appropriate hairstyle and procures more clothes for the successful maintenance of her upper-class disguise.

Unfortunately, Connie frequently belies her upper-class status. Connie/Patricia's behavior is the source of many of the film's funny situations, drawing upon the classic technique of incongruity where humorous circumstances result by placing someone in a position where he or she does not know how to behave properly, a device that *Pretty Woman* utilized extensively. Connie/Patricia does not know how to handle herself

around the servants, insisting on serving her own plate at dinner and passing the dishes across the table rather than allowing the maid to serve each guest. Her verbal miscues undermine her impersonation of the upper-class Patricia, and her speech is a source of comedic material. She uses the words tits and ass during a family dinner with the local priest in attendance.

This story is rife with signifiers of class and social position. Connie is a working-class woman who leaves her unsupportive family to make it on her own. Upon reaching the big city, she is seduced by Steve, a petty thief. Once she becomes pregnant, he kicks her out, penniless and in peril. The Winterbournes are ultra-rich and lead the social hierarchy of their wealthy country lifestyle with a mansion, limos, servants, and all the aristocratic accoutrements. Once Connie/Patricia is ensconced on the Winterbourne estate, the class differences are obvious. Connie is out of place and once again in peril as she fears for her child's future.

The set of circumstances that result in Connie being mistaken for Patricia Winterbourne are convoluted and can only be justified in Hollywood's romanticized version of fate. The film begins with a voice-over narration in which Connie explains that she is in search of her fate. While she prepares for her first homeless night, an elderly homeless man gives her a flyer and tells her about a shelter where she can find food and rest. When she looks back up from the flyer, the man has disappeared in a manner that suggests he is a divine figure of some type, perhaps a guardian angel. Thus, it is fate that has the crowd push the pregnant Connie into the wrong train and fate that she runs into Hugh Winterbourne, who saves her from the conductor by showing Patricia's ticket and then ushering Connie into his private cabin with Patricia. It is also fate that Patricia is an American who has been living in Hong Kong since the age of eight and that her last remaining relative has recently died. Hugh's family has seen no pictures of Patricia and has not heard her voice. Patricia insists that Connie put on some of her clothes and try on her wedding ring. It is this situation that allows the mistaken identity as the train crashes and kills Hugh and Patricia. After the train wreck, Connie is hospitalized. When she has recovered well enough to leave the private hospital, she is picked up by Mrs. Winterbourne's personal chauffeur,

Paco, who drives her to the Winterbournes' mansion. The series of events are so preposterous that they can only be explained as cinematic fate; Connie is destined to become a member of the upper class.

But fate is challenged by the realities of social stratification. Since the Winterbournes live on a country estate with many servants and an upper-class lifestyle, Connie/Patricia begins to worry that she may not be able to maintain her subterfuge. Soon after arriving at the Winterbourne estate, she says to herself, "I'm never going to get away with this." She struggles internally with her desire to explain the unfortunate mistake and attempts on several occasions to illuminate the Winterbournes, but each time she is either thwarted by the situation or decides to postpone the inevitable for the sake of her newborn. Connie realizes that she cannot keep up the ruse, but Hollywood fate keeps her from announcing her true self. She maintains the lie because she loves her baby and does not want to have to raise him in the streets.

Meanwhile, Hugh's twin brother Bill (Brendan Fraser) doubts Connie/Patricia's real identity. He believes that she may be a gold digger masquerading as Patricia and is certain that she is beneath his family's class. While Bill is alone with his mother, he argues, "She's [Connie] hardly in [Hugh's]...." Grace Winterbourne queries, "Class?" Bill replies, "Frankly, yes. You must admit there's more than just a little bit of white trash around the edges." Bill is suspicious and questions Connie/Patricia's authenticity. Eventually, Bill suspects that Connie/Patricia is an impostor and wants to reveal her as a fake. This situation allows the film to show that Bill and the other upper-class characters are insufferable snobs who place too much importance on style and image and not enough on the importance of character.

Bill is a class snob and feels that Connie/Patricia is beneath him and his family. His wish to expose her is the result of his class conceit and desire to remove her from their world, where she does not belong. Bill is a classic version of the wealthy snob who persists in living an unhappy and unfulfilled life while also insisting that it is better than all others. The film denounces the overindulgence of the upper class and communicates that the snobbish socialites' lives are empty of meaning, barren of purpose, destitute of healthy relationships, and especially bereft of true

love. Despite these personal failures, they are committed to preserving appearances, pretenses, and feigned relationships. It is most revealing that this film exposes the sham of the upper class and valorizes Connie's goodness, thus showing the audience that she deserves the security of an economically fair world.

In *Mrs. Winterbourne*, Connie's transformation is in danger as Bill investigates his doubts and soon proves to himself that she is not Patricia. Yet, fate has interceded on Connie's behalf because Grace has insisted that Bill spend so much time with Connie that he has fallen in love with her. His time spent with her has broken down his snobbish facade, and he has learned to love this special person. In fact, Bill's transformation from cold, snobby, and generally unhappy to bright, happy, and euphorically in love with Connie is very similar to the transformation that Edward experiences in *Pretty Woman* and continues the moralizing theme of cross-class relationships.

But this simple film holds some ideological work for the ending. Just as Connie and Bill are getting married, the ex-lover and father of her child reappears and threatens the happily-ever-after ending. Connie is distraught and tells her child, "No matter how hard you try, you could never screw up your life as bad as I've screwed up mine." Even with the prospect of marrying Bill, she does not believe that she is good enough for the Winterbournes' wealthy and privileged world, a perspective that elicits two reassuring lectures that bolster the film's ideology. The first is from Paco, the servant, who explains that Mrs. Winterbourne gave him a job and saved his life after he came to America from Cuba and hints that Grace Winterbourne will also save Connie. Likewise, when Connie/Patricia tells Grace, "I don't fit in here," Grace replies with "Nobody fits in here." Grace explains that she too entered the wealthy world of the Winterbournes through marriage and asserts that the thin blue blood of the Winterbournes needs the infusion of life that people like Connie can offer (a cross-class myth in itself). Therefore, *Mrs. Winterbourne* exonerates working-class morality without doubting the value of upward mobility. Connie is a beautiful, charming, interesting, talented, moral, and otherwise desirable woman despite her class affiliation, who, therefore, merits the rewards and commendations of upper-class membership

without fear of assuming the shallow, empty lives of the socialites that surround her.

Connie achieves upward class mobility for herself and her child and finds true love by becoming the wife of Bill Winterbourne; thus, her ultimate class transformation is achieved. The audience is left to assume that she will, like Grace, develop the needed image and style of the rich in order to function in high society without ridicule.

Once again, the material is moralized. In the beginning, Connie is shown as morally better and personally happier than Bill. Although Connie faced hard times before the train wreck, she is presented as a woman of good moral substance who enjoys life and is fundamentally happy. Her problems are based on structural conditions over which she has no control. Therefore, for the sake of her child's health and well-being, she can be forgiven for not owning up to the case of mistaken identity. In contrast, Bill and the other snobbish characters are shown as shallow, unhappy, and bent on maintaining a rigid class structure that is inegalitarian and brings no happiness. The movie critiques and condemns the excesses of the wealthy, valorizes the inherent superiority of a lower-class morality, and, finally, supports the value of upward mobility by showing that Connie and Bill can live happily ever after without fear of being corrupted by their good fortune. In fact, Mrs. Grace Winterbourne is the proof. She admits that she too achieved upward mobility by marrying a Winterbourne male and shows that she has not been corrupted by the material wealth of the upper class by her loving acceptance of Connie. As in *Pretty Woman*, the underclass woman redeems the upper-class man and gives his life meaning. The result is true love, as they join together in a symbolic marriage of the two classes. This union rhetorically argues that the classless American society remains intact and that, hence, the American Dream of unlimited potential for upward mobility is preserved. Furthermore, the film communicates that the social structures that separate the rich and the poor are practically impenetrable. Of course, once it establishes the concreteness of those structures, the film undermines them. By showing the limitations and then removing them, the film communicates the solubility of social class in America. To do otherwise would deny the American Dream myths;

for if social classes are impenetrable, then a belief in upward mobility is folly. Connie's physical and emotional distress, being pregnant and homeless on the streets of New York, a condition all too real for many Americans, is healed by her class transformation; therefore, it is a personal triumph and an individual resolution for Connie. However, the very real social problems that she faced are left unaddressed, as they don't matter to Hollywood. The message here is that Connie and Bill are okay because America is okay. The American systems work for everybody—just look at Vivian and Edward and Connie and Bill.

White Palace

St. Louis is the setting for Luis Mandoki's feature film *White Palace*, a film so similar to *Pretty Woman* that Ebert (1990) remarked:

> *White Palace* is being billed as autumn's answer to *Pretty Woman*, since once again here's a Cinderella story. But there are some differences. This time, it's not a rich executive falling in love with a gorgeous hooker, but a young ad executive [Max] falling for an older woman who's a waitress [Nora]. (par. 3)

But Ebert further remarks on the differences between this movie and the Cinderella theme: "Also, there's some doubt about who stands to benefit the most from the relationship: the young man, who is uptight and distant, or the older woman" (par. 3). *White Palace* presents two emotionally damaged characters from radically different classes: Max (James Spader), who is "shut down emotionally since his young wife was killed in an auto accident" (Ebert 1990, par. 4), and Nora (Susan Sarandon), who is psychologically troubled by the suicide of her twelve-year-old son.

The differences between the social status of Max and Nora are demonstrated in many ways. Max lives in a stylish part of St. Louis in a beautiful, impeccably decorated and immaculate apartment that costs him $1,200 a month. Nora lives in an economically deprived area know as Dog Town in a small, ramshackle, and filthy house. He is a workaholic at his professional career. She is a fast-food hamburger restaurant

employee. Max speaks with the polished diction of a college-educated person, and Nora's voice bespeaks a working-class background. Max enjoys going to the symphony, and Nora enjoys hanging out in redneck bars where she often drinks to excess and picks up men for sex.

Perhaps the most telling scene concerning the class conflict at work in *White Palace* takes place during a Thanksgiving dinner at the home of Max's friends, the Horowitzes. During the meal, the patriarch of the family begins a political tirade about how the current political administration is bad for the working class. Nora listens for a while and then interjects:

> Mister, I am working-class . . . what the hell do you know about it? . . . doesn't look like you've been missing too many meals. . . . It doesn't make any difference to me who's in the goddamn White House. . . . I'm still gonna be busting my hump for the minimum fucking wage and Betty [pointing to the Horowitzes' maid] here, she's still gonna be serving you turkey for thirty bucks a day.

After her outburst, Nora storms out of the Horowitz house and Max follows her. She states, "I know it's wrong for us to be together, even though I love you," thus acknowledging the ubiquitous social stratifications that exist and that preclude their union. This film acknowledges the real-world fact that cross-class relationships, even friendships, are rare and difficult to maintain (Pogrebin 1987). But in typical Hollywood romantic fashion, Max refuses her suggestion that he should marry "some cute little thing . . . with a college education," and responds that he does not want another woman and that he has never desired anyone as much, not even his deceased wife. "When I'm not with you," he explains, "I'm a total wreck." Ebert observes, "He has never met a woman who reaches him more deeply than [Nora] does. Not even his wife. . . . Yet she exists so far outside his social circle he doesn't want to let her in" (1990, par. 9).

Max is driven to be with Nora but must juggle his need with the difficult task of hiding her from his family and peers. As Ebert points out, "the movie isn't really about that attraction [between Nora and Max]. It's a film on the subject of appropriateness. . . . [Max] feels it necessary

to hide her [Nora] from his upper-middle-class Jewish circle of family and friends" (1990, par. 5). This is a problem for Max because only when he is with Nora in the working-class Dog Town is he able to escape his emotional pain and suffering. However, Max cannot simply cast off his family and friends and move to Dog Town—he finds it dirty and common, and it is the site of Nora's pain. Therefore, the film must move them both.

Unlike *Pretty Woman*, Max cannot limo over to Nora's hovel and whisk her to a fairytale upper-class life. Nora does not like Max's peers and friends, and a few new clothes and some lessons in etiquette will not make her pass for upper class. Likewise, Max will not move to Dog Town and lie around Nora's dirty shack. Max is willing to slum it while he and Nora are falling in love, but Max knows that Nora's lifestyle is dysfunctional and destructive.

In *White Palace,* the healing relationship that Max and Nora share is made significant through the utter failure of his relationships with his family and peers. As in *Mrs. Winterbourne* and *Pretty Woman*, *White Palace* presents the family and peer relationships of its upper-class protagonist as unhelpful to his emotional distress; in some cases, they actually contribute to his problems. In *White Palace,* Max receives no satisfaction or happiness from his peer interactions. His relationships with his best friends are one-sided as he half-heartedly maintains an appearance of friendship while remaining emotionally detached. Max's detachment lies in the superficiality of his upper-class world. The brunches and parties that he attends are populated by stereotypical yuppies preoccupied with gossip and appearance. For example, Max is invited to a typical Sunday brunch party at which his peers hope to fix him (literally) up romantically with one of their own, Heidi Solomon, the party's hostess. In the climactic turning point, Max picks up her vacuum and looks inside; and in a distraught manner, he exclaims that it is empty. This is, of course, a heavy-handed metaphor for his vacuous cohort group.

This final scene highlights Max's emotional and physical commitment to a new life apart from his inane peers. After quitting his job and leaving his upscale lifestyle, he pursues Nora and the healthy relationship

they can now engage in: "I thought you didn't fit in my life but it was me who didn't fit. . . . I'm going back to teaching . . . people discover things about themselves and hope that it isn't too late . . . I want you. I love you, Nora." With that, he leaves his family, friends, and occupation to be with Nora and to become a teacher. The rhetorical therapy once again couples the upper-class character with the lower-class character. The result, as in *Pretty Woman* and *Mrs. Winterbourne*, is that both characters benefit emotionally from the union. Max's emotional injury and suffering is healed through his relationship with Nora. This allows Max to consider a new life away from his elitist family and friends. Nora receives the love from Max that she needs to cope with the painful loss of her son. Likewise, Nora is able to change her destructive lifestyle. Max and Nora's unification undermines the very social structures that the film goes to great lengths to establish as prevalent and significant and, therefore, rhetorically argues that class is easily subverted.

The only feasible narrative resolution for this couple is that they meet in the middle, symbolically, the middle class. Max leaves his upper-class lifestyle for a new life with Nora. Rhetorically, this is represented as a rejection of the snobbish, elitist, and shallow world of his friends and family. Max's move is a rejection of the people who insist on maintaining inegalitarian means of judging peoples' worth due to social elitism. Rhetorically, Max and Nora's union sabotages the social impediments that the film goes to great lengths to establish as undefeatable. Therefore, their bond becomes a rhetorical argument that these restrictions are not omnipresent, not pervasive, not widespread, because Max and Nora overcome them. They prove, through their union, that America is essentially classless and that the classless relationship is paramount. The bond of Max and Nora, like that of Vivian and Edward and Connie and Bill, is a powerful narrative argument for the ease in which social stratifications can be overcome in America.

Titanic

In "movie madness" terms, the late 1990s belongs to a factually based disaster and fictionally presented love story set in the early 1900s, *Titanic*.

Writer and director James Cameron's *Titanic* quickly became the top-grossing film of all time. Its special effects and production costs were the talk of the industry for months before its release. Its box-office triumph, fourteen Academy Award nominations and eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, are reason enough to be interested in this film; but as Heller explains, "More than most films, *Titanic* actually puts matters of class on screen. This is a film that shows immigrants and the poor locked into the lower decks, unable to leave the sinking ship until the wealthy have fled" (1998, A21). The romance between Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) and Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a cross-class fantasy much like the romantic relationships that exists between Edward and Vivian in *Pretty Woman* and Max and Nora in *White Palace*. In *Titanic*, this romantic link is fore-grounded and brings about Rose's transformation from suicidal rich girl to self-confident and self-sufficient woman.

However, *Titanic*'s love story does not close with the fairytale happily-ever-after ending, as does *Pretty Woman*; instead, the ending is bittersweet as Jack heroically perishes while literally saving Rose's life. The central plot is true love in its purest sense, a love so strong that it transcends death and, eighty years later, Rose's spirit returns to Jack on the ocean floor. Unlike *White Palace*, *Titanic* is a story of only one character's transformation, Rose. Jack remains the underclass champion and meets his tragic fate while saving Rose's life. Although Jack finds true love with Rose for a brief time, he experiences no transformation other than martyrdom.

Titanic's melodrama is clear and relies on stock characterizations. The evil characters are the wealthy, pretentious upper class. The immoral upper-class characters include Rose's mother who, for fear of losing her social position as she has lost her money, has forced Rose to agree to marry Cal Hockley, a "supercilious snob" (Ebert 1997, par. 6), who seems to love Rose as an attractive possession, a trophy bride rather than a loving companion. Also in the upper-class ranks is Bruce Ismay, president of the White Star Line, who built the *Titanic* and who cowardly escapes into a lifeboat rather than going down with his ship. This group is rounded out by an assortment of rich men and women, most of whom are portrayed as uncaring and pretentious jerks who all believe they are American sovereignty; as Hockley explains, "[W]e are royalty, Rose." The

good characters, such as Jack, are the ones who have precious little, the dauntless underclass, who are presented as hardworking, ambitious, family-oriented, and unfairly treated people. The audience does not see them for very long because most of the action takes place on the upper decks where the poor are not allowed. Jack gains admission to these first-class areas by saving Rose's life as she attempts suicide. Rose has decided to end her life rather than submit to marrying Hockley, a man she does not love. Between the social elite and the poor is the famous Molly Brown, who has the money to travel first class, but not the cultural capital to be accepted. Molly plays two important functions. First, she debunks the genteel airs of the upper class by telling Jack about their immorality. Second, Molly helps Jack blend in by dressing him appropriately and coaching him on upper-class behavior.

Heller (1998) explains that the signifiers of class position abound in *Titanic*. The differences between the classes are demonstrated through the dress, speech, dining habits, and leisure activities of the materially rich and the poor. More important than the outward markers of class is the behavior of the rich, who are shown as spiritually and morally bankrupt, evil and violent in their treatment of others, and concerned only with money and power. Rose finds no solace or help for her tragic situation among her own class. The total lack of concern for her needs drives her to attempt suicide. Despite her pleas, her mother demands that she marry Hockley for his money.

Titanic puts Rose in a precarious state both physically and emotionally, teetering between happiness and despair as she simultaneously flounders between life and death. Yet she is saved, shown the error of her class, transformed by the love and philosophy of poor Jack, and allowed to live a spiritually fulfilling life free of the horrid influences and excesses of wealth and social acceptance. She learns not to be a snob. Ansen explains, "[T]here's this tremendously personable, handsome man, whose main motivation is to save her life—both literally and figuratively—in the sense of saying, you have a right to have your own life" (1998, 60). Jack teaches Rose how to enjoy life and how to seek adventure every day, and he shows her the value of doing for herself and not exploiting others. Rose is transformed and finds the happiness that

material wealth could not give her in the virtuous life and death of a working-class man, Jack. Unfortunately, Jack dies while saving Rose; but her transformation is complete. After she is rescued from the freezing water, she summons the courage to hide from her family and friends and goes on to live a long, independent, and fulfilling life. However, it seems that Rose never stops loving Jack; so in the end, her spirit returns to Jack and the *Titanic*. Therefore, in a symbolic sense, their true love bond is never broken, even by death.

In *Titanic*, much like *Pretty Woman*, true love allows the lower-class Jack to heal the upper-class Rose's emotionally distraught life and show her the path to happiness. In doing so, *Titanic* takes an even dimmer view of the upper class than the other films I have analyzed. *Titanic* not only portrays the immorality of the upper class, but it goes further to suggest the sinister exploitation of the underclass by the upper class. In *Pretty Woman*, the only upper-class character who comes close to this type of diabolical behavior is Philip, who tries to rape Vivian. Likewise, *Titanic* chooses to be more pro-underclass than *Pretty Woman*, as lower-class characters are depicted as the valiant oppressed. In *Titanic*, the upper class are overwhelmingly depicted as malevolent; and the underclass, as virtuous. Since Jack and many of the other principals perish, Rose is left as the one good character. She refuses to return to the immoral world of the upper class by refusing to tell her family or friends that she survived. The snobbish, immoral, and exploited upper class remains intact and represented by the upper-class characters who survive, many because of immoral acts of self preservation during the sinking. Only Rose remains to remind us of the good-hearted poor folks who also occupied the *Titanic*.

Titanic is overtly concerned with issues of social class and with an explicit condemnation of the upper class. The lower-class characters are virtuous and embody the ideals of both the material and the moralistic aspects of the American Dream. Rose is an upper-class character who needs to be rescued, like Edward in *Pretty Woman*. Jack is able to save Rose and show her how to live a happy life. Although Jack perishes in the epic disaster, their love lives in their spiritual union. That union suggests that both the strict Edwardian-era social class structures and the villainous behavior of the ignoble upper class are no match for the truly classless

myth of American society. The film drives this point home by first demanding that these social strictures are impossible to overcome, and then compounds the point by showing the ruthless immorality of the upper class who deny rescue to innocent poor women and children by locking them below deck. The film spends a titanic amount of time proving that the class-based social structures exist and cannot be overcome by Jack and Rose's love, only to show the audience that their love successfully transcends all obstacles, even death. In other words, after demonstrating that class differences are overwhelming, the film shows that Jack and Rose's love can subvert even the rigid class system of the early 1900s. This rhetorically argues that the classless imperative is intact even in this ill-fated microcosm. Furthermore, even though Rose's later years are not depicted in the film, the audience understands that she led a happy and productive life, free of the immorality of the upper class. She has accomplished this because of her union with Jack, the poor artist who taught her the values of the working class. Although Jack and Rose are not physically united for the rest of her life, they are spiritually joined and embody a classless ideal. The film argues that America must be classless now because even the strict class rules of Edwardian times were easily ignored.

An interesting class aspect of the actual sinking of the great liner is very different from the filmic account. Unlike the valorization of the underclass in the film, Biel (1996) points out that there were many public outcries in the form of newspaper articles, sermons, and the like that condemned even those very few underclass patrons who survived the wreck because they occupied lifeboat seats that could have been filled by upper-class men who were of more value to American society. *Titanic* ignores both the reality of Edwardian class and historical truth to rhetorically argue that America is classless and that cross-class fantasies can solve our social problems.

Passion Fish

John Sayles' *Passion Fish* is not a romantic tale of true love, and the dream of the protagonists is not a fairytale fantasy as in *Pretty Woman*. *Passion Fish* takes a trio of people from different cultures and classes and joins

them in a symbolic embodiment of the classless nature of the American Dream. *Passion Fish*'s main character is May Alice Culhane (Mary McDonnell), a paraplegic who returned to her family's Louisiana bayou home in order to "crawl into a hole and die." A successful soap opera star until a taxi hit her and paralyzed her from the waist down, May Alice's emotional condition is morbid. She refuses most offers of help and verbally abuses her physical and psychological therapists. The result is that many highly qualified and expensive therapists are unable to help her. Therefore, she removes herself from the hospital and takes up residence with a full-time care provider in her deceased parents' stately home. Despite the bayou's beauty and mystery, May Alice spends her days and nights morosely watching television and drinking heavily. The second in the trio of characters is Chantelle (Alfre Woodard), a nurse sent by the agency in a last attempt to please the wealthy but difficult Culhane. As Howe points out, the two women differ "racially, economically, and socially" (1993, par. 5). Chantelle is a black woman from Chicago who battled her way back from a serious drug addiction that resulted in the loss of both guardianship of her daughter and her registered nursing career. She needs a job so that she can support herself and regain custody of her child. The film quickly establishes the class differences between May Alice and Chantelle. May Alice is from wealthy, landed Louisiana gentry; Chantelle is a black woman employed by May Alice for nursing and some domestic duties. Their situation is similar to a woman and her maid; indeed, this mistaken assumption occurs at least twice. Although this comparison is incorrect, it elucidates the hierarchical imbalance of power and explicates their racial and social differences. The trio's final member is Rennie (David Strathairn), a self-described coon-ass bayou handyman who earns his living as a day laborer, a carpenter, and by showing tourists around the swamp in his boat. Rennie constructs the ramps and other supports that May Alice needs in order to venture beyond the tomblike parlor where she hides. He provides her access to her bathroom, bedroom, and the outside world. May Alice admits that when she was young, before leaving home for a women-only finishing school, she was romantically interested in Rennie; however, his self-proclaimed white-trash social status and mixed ancestry made him a unacceptable suitor. Although this backstory establishes the

class differences between May Alice and Rennie, as in her relationship with Chantelle, it is ultimately too simplistic to fully describe their bond. This unlikely trio of a paraplegic rich woman, a downwardly mobile black nurse from Chicago, and a poor bayou handyman make up *Passion Fish*'s social gumbo.

Although *Passion Fish* does not offer a fairytale ending and, unlike Vivian in *Pretty Woman*, May Alice has no dreams of a shining-armored knight, the changes that occur in May Alice are similar to, albeit more intense than, the ones that Edward experiences in *Pretty Woman*. At the beginning of this film, May Alice has resigned herself to a living death and seems determined to make everyone else wish she were dead. May Alice is physically, emotionally, and psychologically injured. Besides her paralysis, she has trouble sleeping, has no appetite, chronically abuses alcohol, and is despondent, angry, and suicidal. Through her cross-class relationship with Chantelle and Rennie, she recovers emotionally and psychologically: She becomes a recovering alcoholic, finds beauty in the world around her through photography, takes her physical therapy seriously, and envisions herself in a loving relationship. Scenes of her emotional recovery demonstrate May Alice's radical change from the beginning of this film to its end.

Further, this is not a simple narrative of upward mobility. Chantelle's and Rennie's material conditions do not radically change during the course of the film. Chantelle needs her job and demonstrates that she is willing to put up with May Alice's impossible behavior in order be successful because she needs to prove that she is stable enough to regain custody of her daughter. At the movie's conclusion, Chantelle still has the same job, but her life is much better because she enjoys a mutually satisfying relationship with Rennie and May Alice. Likewise, Rennie is still unhappily married and continues to work at odd jobs; but his life is enriched by the newly formed relationship. Rennie and May Alice develop a budding romance that promises to blossom by the end of the film despite Rennie's religiously fundamentalist wife and five children. Although it seems that May Alice and Rennie may indeed negotiate a loving relationship, it is not their joining in true love, as it is in *Pretty Woman*, which rhetorically solves the problems of all involved. Of

course, May Alice's recovery is nothing short of miraculous; but even more significant is her decision not to return to her old soap opera job when it is offered to her because she too values the newly formed three-way cross-class relationship.

May Alice's recovery via her relationships with Chantelle and Rennie is especially noteworthy when compared to May Alice's interactions with people of her own class who are unable to reach her emotionally or help her physically. For example, May Alice is visited by two of her childhood friends from finishing school, Precious and Ti-Marie. Their visit is torture for May Alice. They treat Chantelle as a servant and ask May Alice, "Did her people work for your people?" Likewise, a visit from friends of May Alice's New York City soap opera days is equally painful. These three women also mistake Chantelle for a "family retainer" and inconsiderately remind May Alice of her failed marriage and lost career. Both female groups are portrayed as shallow and pretentious upper-class women unable to get beyond their own obsessions with superficial matters to understand May Alice's needs.

The film encourages the audience to notice the differences in class and status of the three principal characters. Fundamentally, May Alice is at the height of this hierarchy. She is white, landed, privately educated Louisiana gentry. Chantelle is placed in the stereotypical position of black servant to the white mistress; the distinction between home nurse and maid is easily missed by May Alice's peers, who share her elite social position. Rennie is the self-proclaimed hired hand and is placed in the equally stereotypical position of white-trash laborer.

The professionally trained therapists fail in May Alice's rehabilitation, her peers are presented as too self-centered to reach beyond their own lives, and May Alice herself does not have the personal traits needed to weather such a devastating life change. In the end, it is two people from socially, culturally, and economically lower classes who are able to show May Alice the reasons she has for living and give her the emotional and physical help she needs. Hence, in *Passion Fish,* May Alice's recovery is accomplished by engaging in a community that is based on an egalitarian ideal of trust and need rather than the traditional social hierarchy of the regional culture.

Their three-way interaction forms the community that enacts and enables the healing and help they all need. Chantelle and Rennie also benefit from the cross-class relationship. Chantelle's drug abuse ruined her nursing career and resulted in her daughter being placed in Chantelle's father's home with him as the legal guardian. Chantelle's best hope of regaining her daughter is to be part of a stable and functional family or community. When Chantelle's father brings her daughter to Louisiana for a visit, he also assesses Chantelle's home life. By the time he arrives, the magic of the three-way cross-class relationship has worked many of its miracles; and he is impressed enough to suggest that, if things continue to improve, Chantelle may be permanently reunited with her daughter. Likewise, May Alice and Rennie's budding romance gives them hope for the future and comfort each day. Rennie's fundamentalist wife and children do not provide him with domestic bliss. Although he is content to go about his daily chores without complaint, the audience knows that he desires more and hopes for a mutually reassuring relationship with May Alice. The film demonstrates that all of these people are in need of something that, in one way or another, their traditional families or relationships are unable or unwilling to provide.

But neither May Alice and Chantelle's friendship nor May Alice and Rennie's fledgling romance enact the healing in the film. Instead, the three-way cross-class relationship establishes these characters as a community. What makes this relationship interesting is that it achieves a symbolically classless state to promote the healing of the three characters. Chantelle, May Alice, and Rennie overcome pervasive social and cultural structures to form their relationship. These structures include differences in race, economic standing, educational level, and birthright. The very fact that two women, one an elite white and the other a working-class African American, share a bond of friendship and mutual benefit and live together in an egalitarian fashion flies in the face of traditional racist southern social structures. With the addition of Rennie to the group, the destruction of social hierarchies along traditional lines of power based on race and class is even more remarkable.

Their relationship is classless in nature; they form a rhetorically classless bond that subverts the social stratifications formed according to

race, class, and gender. The fact that May Alice, Chantelle, and Rennie can overcome pervading social structures makes their relationship an example of how these structures can be subverted, ignored, removed, overcome, or disregarded. Rhetorically, this film argues that longstanding and extensive social divisions based upon lines of race, class, and gender can be muted, and that forming an egalitarian and classless relationship is not only possible, but is beneficial to all participants.

Rhetorically, the film suggests that America must be a classless society if a socially privileged white woman, a recovering drug-addicted African American woman, and a poor handyman can form an egalitarian and nurturing relationship based on mutual trust and love. This point is made even more obvious by the fact that the more traditional and socially hierarchically based relationships are shown to be dysfunctional. Therefore, the combined myths of the American Dream are embodied in this utopian relationship, in which hard work and perseverance provide these three people the success that they want, while simultaneously communicating the well-being of the American Dream as the embodiment of a classless society where "the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for dignity and worth of each and every individual" reign supreme (Fisher 1973, 161).

The Fisher King

Romance has played a significant role in the films I have addressed so far in this chapter, partially because Hollywood narratives traditionally revolve around work and romantic lines of action. But I close this chapter with a film that does not foreground its romantic relationships but, instead, concentrates on a friendship between two unlikely men. Director Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* begins with the protagonist Jack Lucas (Jeff Bridges), a shallow, conceited, smart-ass shock-radio disc jockey, refusing to lower the window of his limousine to give a homeless man a quarter. By the end of the film, however, Lucas will do almost anything to help another homeless man, Parry. Jack's reasons for this revolve around the dramatic change that occurs because of his beneficial relationship with Parry (Robin Williams). They meet because Parry saves

Jack's life, both from an attempted suicide and a brutal attack by hoodlums. Yet, saving Jack's life is only the beginning. Before Parry is finished, he redeems Jack and gives him the will to live, the power to enjoy life, the capacity to love, and the ability to help others. In short, Jack is transformed from a man with a selfish lifestyle that brings him suicidal depression to a loving and happy man who understands the importance of community.

In the beginning, the ill-spirited and pretentious Jack is a karmic disaster; but his condition soon worsens. Because of a flippant remark to an emotionally troubled radio listener, Jack sets a tragic series of events in motion. The unstable radio listener goes to a trendy restaurant, where he murders seven strangers and kills himself. The murderer goes on a rampage because Jack assures him, via the radio talk show, that the people who frequent this spot are shallow yuppies who would not socially accept the caller under any conditions. Although Jack is at the height of his career when he hears of the incident, it shatters his world. He is psychologically devastated by the consequences of his offhanded remarks and sinks into a long-term and pervasive clinical depression.

Jack's depression is visible in his lifestyle. Three years after his careless comments, Jack is working in his lover's video store; and he is a paranoid, suicidal alcoholic. He emotionally tortures himself and verbally abuses his partner Anne (Mercedes Ruehl). He voices his pain by asking, "You ever get the feeling you're being punished for your sins?" Before the shootings, he dressed in trendy styles, had a neat appearance, and lived in an upscale apartment. Afterwards, his physical look changes radically; he cares little for his appearance and dresses in worn-out, ill-fitting clothes. Jack looks so bad that a boy on the street calls him "Mr. Bum." Moreover, Jack and Anne live a working-class life. They reside above her video store in a New York neighborhood that suffers from the outward signs of urban decay. Her Brooklyn accent, gaudy dress, and hairstyle carry the common filmic working-class female signifiers of *Working Girl.* Their working-class apartment is far from Jack's chrome-and-glass penthouse. Anne lovingly cares for Jack even though he avoids work and verbally abuses her and their customers. In this way, the film juxtaposes Jack's upscale life with Anne's working-class life.

Jack's shabby appearance leads him to Parry. In fact, Jack looks so bad that he is attacked by delinquents who resent homeless people as he drunkenly stumbles about the city. The irony of the assault is that hoodlums try to kill Jack during his own sloppy suicide attempt. Luckily, Parry, "an apparently deranged but witty homeless person" (Howe 1991, par. 4), intervenes and saves Jack's life from this double threat. Thus, when Jack meets Parry, they begin the cross-class relationship that will eventually help them both.

Unlike the focus on working-class and upper-class signifiers of *Pretty Woman*, *White Palace*, and *Passion Fish*, this film concentrates on the poor underclass and offers a rare Hollywood cinematic look at the homeless. Unfortunately, beyond a superficial accounting of the travails of the homeless, the film does not attempt to make the audience aware of their serious plight. Instead, the movie merely uses the outward signifiers of homelessness as a shorthand method of establishing class differences. Moreover, the film sets up a philosophical shorthand for the class differences between Jack and Parry by briefly invoking Nietzsche. In a drunken stupor, Jack talks to a wooden puppet and evokes Nietzsche's two types of people: "Those destined for greatness and the bungled and the botched . . . the expendable masses." Jack exemplifies both as his tragic fate carries him through this story. In the beginning, Jack is a member of the economically privileged and, with his skyrocketing career, seems destined for show business greatness. After he is unable, through depression, to continue work, he quickly moves to working-class environs, demonstrating a predominant fear of downwardly mobile class moves (Ehrenreich 1989). Parry is the filmic version of the abject homeless; but in actuality, Parry is a college professor who suffers from a mental breakdown. Thus, the film suggests that both Jack's and Parry's problems are a result of their emotional states, which have drove both, mentally and physically, to Nietzsche's bungled and botched realm.

As in the other cross-class relationships, Jack and Parry are in need of each other's help. Parry suffers emotionally from the traumatic experience of seeing his beautiful young wife shot to death by the man that Jack's careless remarks sent on a homicidal rampage. After they meet, Jack realizes that he is driven by his tortured and guilt-ridden mind to

do something for Parry. Howe explains that Jack "realizes that he has to save [Parry] Williams in order to save himself" (1991, par. 5). After Parry saves Jack from the hoodlums, Jack returns to Anne but is haunted by Parry's world. Jack cannot sleep and tearfully tells Anne that he feels cursed. He finds Parry and provides him with money, but Parry gives the cash to another homeless person. When Jack explains that he wants to help, Parry explains that his quest is the Holy Grail. In Parry's deranged world, the grail is being held in a castle-like home in Manhattan; and Parry plans a recovery mission. Jack does not take this quest seriously, but learns that Parry worships an awkward girl, Lydia, from afar. Jack decides to help Parry woo and win Lydia. In this way, the film establishes Jack and Parry's cross-class relationship.

The movie offers some brief glimpses at Hollywood's version of the homeless. Jack's guilt and plan to unite Lydia and Parry motivate him to spend time with the New York City homeless, and he learns to see them as troubled souls. In one scene, Jack speaks with a homeless disabled veteran in a wheelchair. In Grand Central terminal, Jack sees the vet panhandling. A passerby drops some coins in the vet's cup. Jack remarks to the vet that the passerby was rude because he didn't make eye contact. The vet says, "He's paying so he doesn't have to look." At another time, Jack comforts Dennis, a homeless man who adopts a comical cabaret singer persona, in an emergency room. Throughout the film, Jack meets homeless people and is better able to understand their plight through these interactions.

Jack has begun the difficult path to redemption as he learns to care for the homeless people whom he meets, but Jack has not yet embraced personal transformation as is evidenced by his second failure. Jack arranges a double date with Anne, Parry, and Lydia. At the end of the evening, it seems that Jack is recovering from his morbid depression as he seems joyful and sleeps. The next day, happy Jack tells Anne that he is ready to return to his career. Anne is excited for Jack, but her happiness is soon shattered as he callously dumps her. Jack rejects Anne's love as he attempts to return to his old life because Jack feels, like Max in *White Palace*, that there is no room for a working-class woman in his upper-class world. Meanwhile, the film visually reestablishes Jack in his lofty

position. His appearance and dress return to the cool, detached chic of Manhattan; he once again rides in limos, lives in a penthouse, and takes meetings in huge, black glass high-rise buildings. The change is even indicated by his theme music, "I've Got the Power." Jack is presented as having made it, or perhaps remade it. The final proof is his refusal to acknowledge Dennis, the cabaret-singing homeless man, as Jack enters a skyscraper for a meeting with a television executive. The audience is shown a cold and selfish Jack Lucas for the second time in the film. Jack has regained the trappings of success, but these material items are unable to smother the real changes taking place in his psyche.

Jack wants to break free of Parry's influence, ditch Anne, and return to his previous social status. In essence, he selfishly wants to end the cross-class relationship. But the rhetoric of these films is clear. Only the maintenance of the cross-class relationship can save the characters from their various plights. At the TV studio meeting, the television executive pitches a script focused on three clever homeless men. The idea's ridiculousness penetrates Jack's cold exterior; and in a fit of conscience, he runs from the building in search of Dennis, whom he refused to acknowledge earlier. Jack realizes that his happiness is in jeopardy, and so he searches for Dennis where he knows homeless people can be found. In looking for Dennis, Jack finds Parry. Unbeknownst to Jack, after the double date, Parry was attacked and beaten into a catatonic state by the two punks who tried to kill Jack. Jack learns that Lydia, despite only one date with Parry, has been a regular visitor, bringing him colorful sheets and pajamas in a display of tender love. Jack speaks to the catatonic Parry, "This isn't over is it? Everybody's got bad things that happen to them. I've got an incredible[ly good] fucking life, [but] I feel like I've got nothing." From there, Jack puts on Parry's "knight" outfit and breaks into the private residence that Parry believes houses the grail. There he recovers a grail-like loving cup and brings the cup to Parry. Miraculously, Parry awakens and is soon reunited with Lydia, no longer suffering from his emotional trauma. Jack's selfless act finally releases Jack also, and he is able to see the error of his ways. Likewise, Jack reunites with Anne as he realizes that he truly loves her. The film ends with Jack and Parry in Central Park, lying naked in the grass at night

and looking up at the clouds. They are together again, happy, redeemed, healed, and free of the social stratifications that once separated them.

The Fisher King communicates the importance of community over self-interest. The film rejects any open attack on the inegalitarian social stratification in the United States and its inhumane conditions in terms of the homeless. Instead, it offers personal choices, personal mistakes, and personal illnesses as the reasons for the many societal problems illustrated in this motion picture. The term "botch" itself suggests personal bungling or clumsiness and is the film's explanation for its characters' problems. In fact, the movie implies that people are homeless because they are comically crazy while ignoring the fact that many homeless Americans are hardworking families that cannot earn enough to afford housing.

Jack's and Parry's ill-fated lives are shown as the result of personal problems. Jack is a pretentious, self-absorbed bastard who gets his deserved comeuppance. Parry is an innocent bystander who suffers emotional collapse when he sees his wife murdered. Societal institutions are unable to help these two botched souls; so Jack slowly becomes self-destructive, and Parry becomes a deranged homeless man who charmingly speaks to invisible fat people. Here, as in the other films I have discussed in this chapter, the cross-class relationship becomes the solution to their problems. Jack and Parry are excellent examples of how easy it is for people to fall down the social hierarchy, so they implicitly argue that America has explicit social stratifications. Simultaneously, their relationship is a rhetorical example of the utopia of a classless American society. This relationship morally and spiritually sutures Parry's and Jack's wounds. This is not the true love of *Pretty Woman*, *White Palace*, or *Titanic*, or the healing, classless family of *Passion Fish*. This is a platonic relationship between two botched men. Although the two men obviously care for each other, they are not in love. Jack and Parry's relationship subverts the omnipresent rules of social class behavior. The result is a morally and spiritually uplifting message of healing and hope for both upper class and underclass in America.

Sadly, the film never offers an explicit criticism of the social system that encourages an unfair stratification that forces human beings to

live disadvantaged lives. There is no Robespierre to raise a call to revolution, no intellectual questioning of the inherent folly of the system, no mild-mannered spiritual leader to make the moral argument. Instead, the film relies on personal folly and bad timing to create the situation, and then rights the wrongs through personal sacrifice. Jack and Parry are proof that a classless relationship is a healing experience—that the tenets of the American Dream's moral and materialistic myths are the prescription for a healthy social order. Implicit in this argument is a humanist statement that charges the upper class with the sin of hubris; but unfortunately, there is also an unspoken argument that the underclass is a collection of deranged but generally funny people.

The Rhetoric of Cross-Class Relationships

These movies present class conflicts as personal problems that are resolved by the transformations of the characters through true love (as in *Pretty Woman*, *Mrs. Winterbourne*, *White Palace*, and *Titanic*), the formation of a classless family or community (*Passion Fish*), or putting the needs of others above self-interest (*The Fisher King*). In doing so, these films communicate a pervasive narrative that shows that upper-class characters are in need of help that can only be supplied by a close relationship with a member from a lower social status. Likewise, these films demonstrate the inability of the often morally corrupt upper class to provide its troubled members with the type of healing they need to lead meaningful lives. In other words, the upper classes are devoid of the compassion needed to help the protagonists overcome their problems. The lower classes are presented as purveyors of love, strength, and goodness, but are also in need of help, especially when they are unable to fulfill their material needs, such as Vivian in *Pretty Woman*, Connie in *Mrs. Winterbourne*, and Chantelle in *Passion Fish*. However, the needs of the lower-class characters can also reach beyond their material circumstances, such as Nora in *White Palace*, Rennie in *Passion Fish*, and Parry in *The Fisher King*. Only Jack in *Titanic* seems to have no material or emotional problems other than a desire for true love. Regardless of the

needs, the films are clear in their rhetorical arguments that cross-class relationships are beneficial to all involved.

Perhaps even more persuasive is the view of the world outside the cross-class relationships, where the immoral upper-class members form relationships that are materially rich but morally bankrupt. They live sorry lives of meaningless excess and enjoy no real love or caring. They are immoral and unethical parasites who feed off one another and are unable to find solace in their wealth. Once the upper-class characters embrace the cross-class relationship, their former psychological problems are healed; however, they do not renounce their material possessions. They simply leave their immoral families and peers and escape their unhealthy relationships by bringing their material wealth into the cross-class relationship. The films go to great lengths to show that the upper-class characters are self-indulgent snobs; yet it is important that the source of their immorality is not their material wealth, or else bringing it into the cross-class relationship would be corrupting. The material wealth is moralized by bringing it into the cross-class relationship, thus making it acceptable to society's view of what is right and good. For the pretentious upper class, their material wealth is a source of snobbery and elitism; but when the cross-class relationship is formed, the material wealth simply makes life easier for characters who obviously deserve it.

In the context of the widening gap in wealth between the upper 1 percent of the American population and the ever-shrinking middle and working classes, these filmic narratives are troubling interpretations of cross-class relationships. Pogrebin's statement that "all other class problems seem to pale beside the ambivalence and guilt surrounding the issue of cross-class friendships" (1987, 156) supports the significance of these motion pictures. While these movies highlight both the ambivalence and the guilt that these characters experience because of their cross-class relationships, they ultimately dissolve social limitations and structures to bring these disparate people together so that the magic of the cross-class fantasy can occur.

The psychological and physical transformations of the troubled characters propose a way of recovering from the vast societal imbalances that challenge the classless view of American society and offer redemption to

those who have lost faith in the American Dream. These films rhetorically suspend the basic class conundrum. If social class structures are bona fide, then how can the American Dream of unfettered upward mobility be true? These movies resolve this dilemma by concomitantly establishing that class differences are real, by subverting them via personal relationships, and by offering the relationships themselves as proof that America is indeed classless.

The motion pictures offer the relationships themselves as the tautological answer to the problem. Regardless of location—Los Angeles, the bayou, or the Midwest—the establishment of a cross-class relationship offers a vision of America as a rhetorically classless society that embodies economic opportunity and well-being as well as moral goodness. This is the United States that Americans have been taught to believe in and desire. This is possible because the gap in wealth between the upper and lower classes is presented in individual terms, not in structural terms. The upper-class characters and the lower-class characters transcend the social, educational, material, and cultural gaps that separate them and are physically brought together in the filmic version of a classless America. The cinematic relationships subvert the structural differences they go to great lengths to establish.

Individuals who remain in the cross-class relationships via whatever bond, romantic or platonic, find a sense of place, a feeling of belonging, a fulfillment of desire, spiritual healing, moral uprightness, and economic well-being. The fictional relationships are the narrative equivalent of the harmony of the classless American society. This is a result of the classless imperative, a narrative need for the establishment of a place where moral success is attained by the individual and where structural class differences do not impede personal initiative. It is in keeping with the dominant view that America is a huge middle class with only those who deserve to be poor at the bottom and the immoral rich at the top. This mythic American middle class is a place where personal achievement is not affected by structural impediments (therefore classless) and where Americans can enjoy economic well-being without fearing that they will become pretentious, supercilious, immoral, or spiritually bankrupt.

This view of America as free of social limitations is so important that Americans maintain a belief in a myth of a classless society despite the ravages of an unfair economic system that savagely separates the well-to-do from the bulk of Americans who struggle to make ends meet (Braun 1991; Davis 1986; Kleinhans 1985; Lipsitz 1981; Lorde 1992; Mantsios 1992; Phillips 1990; Pogrebin 1987; Ross 1998). The unfairness of this system is evident in the twin facts that women, minorities, and children suffer the most from the imbalances and that their condition is worsening (Mantsios 1992; Phillips 1990). Pogrebin (1987, 150) states the problem succinctly: "[T]he 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]."

To maintain the precarious balance between representing the ridiculously wide gap between the richer and the poorer and the almost unshakable myth of a classless America, these films must provide a mythic place safely removed from the scorched reality of American economics. This mythic place is symbolized by the cross-class relationship that conjoins the upper and lower classes. The different classes are brought together in a rhetorical healing of class-divided America, a rhetoric that offers its audience a reassuring, calming, and egalitarian view of America. These movies show that all structural inequalities can be undone on the individual level and that neither the upper class nor the lower classes are ideal. Indeed, it is only in the cross-class fantasy where financial security and moral uprightness can both be attained. That cross-class relationship represents the joining of the working-class values of the American Dream with a promise of the financial security of the upper classes.

The rhetoric provides the moralizing of the material disparities in America by reducing inequality to the individual level. That is, these films create a classless utopia in cross-class relationships where the materially rich but morally bankrupt characters and the materially less fortunate but virtuous characters are conjoined harmoniously. This is accomplished by distilling the serious social stratifications that create the unfair economic situations experienced by Americans into the filmic

language of the individual. In other words, the economic conditions that divide the U.S. population are reduced to the problems of individual characters and are solved through cross-class relationships. The result is that the gulf that exists between the affluent and underprivileged is bridged by pleasant interpersonal relationships that personify both material security and moral goodness. The upper-class and lower-class characters are united in a rhetorical rehabilitation of a class-divided society, the personification of the American Dream. This rhetorical move extends a heartening, placating, and healthy view of the United States as the exalted land of the American Dream. Just as the various characters are cured, the nation's immoral economic imbalances are rhetorically healed. In short, the films symbolically solve America's economic disparity through relationships that moralize material wealth by making it one part of a virtuous cross-class relationship.

CHAPTER 5

The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

American culture clings doggedly to the myth of the United States as a classless society and to the American Dream of upward mobility. However, in the late twentieth century, the United States of America led all industrial nations in income inequality (Kerbo 1996). The working class and working poor suffered as the upper classes accumulated financial wealth, power, status, and influence. "The result," states Ehrenreich, "according to the Census Bureau, is that the income gap between the richest families and the poorest is now wider than it has been at any time since the bureau began keeping statistics in 1947" (1990, 198). This huge income gap is in opposition to the dual myths of the American Dream and the classless nature of American society. As Sawhill (2000, 27) points out, "The distribution of income in the United States is, according to all the evidence, less equal than other industrialized countries." Moreover, DeParle argues that

> the rising inequality has grown so familiar that it has lost its ability to startle. In the salad days of the 1990s, the incomes of the poorest fifth of American households rose 8 percent; the top fifth gained 40 percent; and the richest 5 percent of Americans received a greater share of the national income than the bottom 60 percent combined. (2004, 327)

Despite these inequalities, Americans continue to believe in the American Dream and its fundamentally promised equality. But Scott

and Leonhardt (2005, 1) explain that the social mobility "which once buoyed the working lives of Americans as it rose in the decades after World War II, has flattened out."

With the classic American Dream economically outdistancing most working-class people, Americans might begin to question its veracity. While many Americans admit that social inequalities exist in the United States and that they lead to the unfair distribution of resources, these same individuals "deemed 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 1985, 578). As Thio (1972, 381) explains, the

> American ideology of success consists of two related social functions. It encourages the populace (1) to raise their level of aspirations and (2) to believe in the established society as one with abundant opportunities for all citizens. . . . The latter may be regarded functional in terms of their blaming themselves rather than society for their deprivation.

In spite of economic realities that demonstrate that most people are not living the American Dream, Americans cling to the resilient myth. For example, Scott and Leonhardt (2005, 1) cite a recent poll that states, "40 percent of Americans believed that the chance of moving up from one class to another has risen over the last 30 years, a period in which the new research shows that it has not." How does the American Dream continue to thrive when it is increasingly difficult for working-class people to achieve upward mobility? This resiliency is partially because the American Dream is alive and well in popular American culture.

More specifically, how does contemporary Hollywood cinema reaffirm the preeminence of the American Dream? Three themes concerning the American Dream are communicated via contemporary Hollywood films. The first theme, "moralizing mobility," is the common rags-to-riches success story in which the moral protagonist realizes the American Dream. These films revolve around working-class characters who yearn for upward mobility and whose success is made possible because of their admirable motives and hard work. These dramas present conflicts as personal problems of mobility for individuals who

accomplish upward moves without surrendering the ethical superiority of their virtuous characters.

The second theme, "moralizing failure," is the rational reverse of successful upward mobility, where the characters fail in their bid for a higher social status. These movies rhetorically cope with failed mobility without questioning the basic tenets of the American Dream. Instead, they offer stories that present conflict between immorally obtained success and the honorable preeminence of accepting one's materially inferior but morally superior working-class background. Typically, the working-class individuals are corrupted by immoral motives that attend the desire for greater wealth or prestige. Although they fail at upward mobility, the characters experience personal conversions through which they relearn the virtue of their working-class values. This rhetoric argues that acceptance of one's self and one's class is morally superior to upward mobility.

The third theme, "moralizing the material," involves narratives that focus on emotionally and/or physically distressed upper-class characters who benefit from a close relationship with characters of a lower social class. In these films, the upper-class protagonists are often immoral or corrupt, misled, and always unhappy or depressed. Their lives are empty and meaningless despite their material wealth and/or power. Circumstances bring them into a close relationship with a struggling working-class or poor person who redeems the upper-class character by showing him or her the way to living a full and happy life. The result is a therapeutic cross-class relationship that is beneficial for all its members. The rhetoric of these films is that the cross-class relationship symbolizes and instantiates the belief that America is a classless society.

These three themes are central to the American Dream in film. These narratives counsel a rhetoric that communicates that all is well and, moreover, that the structural and societal inequalities of contemporary America can and should be managed on the individual level. Contemporary Hollywood films reaffirm the supremacy of the American Dream despite an ever-worsening economy that squeezes the middle class and forces the working class into low-paying service jobs, an economic situation that furthers the gap between the rich and the poor in the United

States. As Herbert (2005, 19) argues, "The gap between the rich and everybody else in this country is fast becoming an unbridgeable chasm." Zweig (2004, 1) explains that "Euphemisms about the middle class and consumer society are no longer persuasive when chief executives pay themselves tens of millions of dollars while their employees are thrown out of work with ruined pensions." Zweig continues, "When huge tax cuts go to the richest 1 percent . . . while workers suffer the burdens of lost public services, people wonder if we're really all in this together." Convincing working-class Americans that it is their personal failure that denies them the American Dream allows the economic hegemony of the upper class to continue unchecked and furthers a political agenda based on the abandonment of government-sponsored social services to aid struggling Americans that were developed decades ago. The realities of the shrinking middle and working class require that they work more for less as they are downsized further from the American Dream. It is repugnant that material wealth is constantly promised, with the false proviso that folks must work harder. It is troubling that they are told that through individual effort they will be able to overcome insurmountable societal imbalances. The truth is that the gap between the wealthy and the working class is so wide that the only way to bridge it is rhetorically.

The films that formed the foundation of this analysis act as rhetorical counseling for individuals wrestling with class issues. In short, these films act as rhetorical discourse to ease feelings of failure. The purpose of this study was to look at films as symbolic acts, to illustrate how they speak to life in the United States, and to elucidate their rhetorical viewpoint. The focus of this research was to look at the communication between the individual and the societal elements of the American ideology of class in order to better comprehend the interaction through discourse. The messages regarding class direct an individual's identity and operate to protect, mend, or transform that identity. These narratives counsel a rhetoric that suggests that the gross structural and societal inequalities in the United States can be managed via individual morality, not social change. The vast inequalities that predicate class relations in American society evoke questioning of the legitimacy of the American Dream, an untenable act that would inevitably lead to questioning

fundamental power structures. Thus, these films offer Americans a way of understanding their own personal experiences of failure in terms of the American Dream myth.

Simultaneously and repeatedly, Hollywood communicates three important aspects of class and the American Dream. First, the American Dream is reaffirmed through movies that moralize mobility and preach that the American Dream works for moral candidates. Achieving the American Dream is the reward for individual morality. Second, films that moralize the material instantiate the myth of a classless America and argue that the ruling class is not innately immoral. Third, movies that moralize failure acknowledge that attempts at upward mobility will not always be successful. Yet, these films do not place the blame on unfair social structures; but instead they fault the protagonists' individual morality. The protagonists failed because they were motivated by immoral means or unworthy goals for their attempt at upward mobility. This is innately an individual failure. However, the films' rhetoric does not stop with this ethical warning but adds a moral proviso that stipulates that acceptance of one's self, and therefore one's class, is the preferred outcome and is superior to upward mobility. Consequently, these movies offer a rhetoric that both maintains the American Dream of success and offers ways of coping with personal failure through individual transformation.

Thus, what conclusions may be drawn concerning the role and/or function of these dramas and themes? This research supports four general conclusions. First, the American Dream and its related materialism are neither openly criticized nor doubted. The motive of mobility is never directly questioned or censured although its moral standards and values are investigated and the proper moral attitude and behavior prescribed. Second, although corruption among individuals in the upper class is often a problem, the elite themselves can be redeemed. Thus, the upper class is not demonized as a group. Even though individual characters may be villainous, there is never a wholesale condemnation of the elite, which allows for the maintenance of the myth of America as a truly classless society and the possible joining of lower and upper classes in harmonious cross-class relationships. Further, this approach perpetuates the hegemony of the elite classes. Third, the ideology of these films tends

to valorize, depict, exemplify, flesh out, and make real the working-class morality of American society. Indeed, this is what redeems corrupt individuals. Individual lower-class characters can be villainous, but their villainy is attributed to a lack of character rather than the fault of their class membership. Further, these films argue that the only real difference in the classes is a superficial difference based on consumer cultures and fashion. Fourth, the dialectics of class identity in these films is experienced in terms of individual success and failure; and class passage is offered as the reward for individual success.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will perform three tasks. First, I will offer my analysis of the findings of this research. Second, I will make some concluding statements about class and film in American society. Finally, I will offer a perspective based in critical media pedagogy as one method of dealing with some of these problems.

Analysis of Conclusions

In *Life the Movie,* Gabler suggests that by the late twentieth century, the human "mind had begun processing life the way it processed the movies and consequently that if the movies were a metaphor for the condition of human existence, the moviegoer was a metaphor for how one could cope with that existence" (1998, 240). The foundation of Gabler's argument can be understood both implicitly and explicitly from Burke's concept of humankind as symbol users. Burke's idea of drama and literature as equipment for living illuminates how humans make sense of their world and understand their place in it. Payne's treatment of therapeutic rhetoric follows this view to take us closer to the heart of what has become our therapeutic frame of mind based on individual success and failure (1989a; 1989b). Indeed, failure brings with it a need to cope; and coping is what humans must do every day as life experiences question our identities and our understanding of others. Cloud explains that "the therapeutic refers to a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy's lexicon—the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order" (1998, xvi).

The American ideology of class is complex and ambiguous and mostly explained in terms of individual success and failure. How do we, as individuals, cope with the constant, diverse, and important questions of class in America? It is obvious that the polemics are ignored, talk of class is all but forbidden, and a discussion of a collective response to class bias is both overtly and implicitly sanctioned. Therefore, the individual is left to cope with failures in such a way as to maintain both a prevailing belief in the American Dream and the primacy of the individual's role in success and failure.

In the following section, I will show how the three themes of moralizing mobility, moralizing failure, and moralizing the material support each of my four findings: the American Dream is sacrosanct, the dominant class is not immoral or exploitative, working-class values are lauded, and class is not social in America—it is individual.

The American Dream Is Sacrosanct

Moralizing the material reveals the mythic utopia of a classless society through cross-class relationships. In this theme, the immoral upper class is brought into a harmonic relationship with the virtuous lower class; and they are conjoined in a mythic vision of a classless society. The unethical wealthy and the virtuous poor rhetorically cancel out one another's misfortunes and are transformed into an economically advantaged and ethical cross-class relationship, a microcosm of the mythic classless America and inherently based on the upward mobility of the American Dream. My first and second themes, moralizing mobility and moralizing failure, address two sides or views of the American Dream of success. They each approach upward mobility from their own unique perspective and then offer their own rhetoric. The first of these moralizes successful mobility, and the second concerns itself with failed mobility and offers rhetoric of class acceptance and its values as the real success formula.

The three themes fundamentally address the same basic question: How can Americans doggedly cling to a belief in America as a classless society and the American Dream of success in light of overwhelming social and economical inequalities based upon race, class, and gender? A

rhetoric that denies structural inequalities in favor of a symbolic language of individual success and failure is central to this condition. This therapeutic rhetoric abates fears of a classed society that divides power, resources, and rewards along lines of race, class, and gender by assuring us that all Americans have the same opportunities to succeed in the United States. These narratives never doubt that mobility is a worthy and significant goal for individuals. Mobility is not the issue; instead, the morality of the character seeking the mobility is in question.

In other words, the individual is the nucleus of social morality; therefore, the individual's success and failure can be measured according to moralizing values rather than by an ambiguous concept of mobility. The result is that upward mobility is displaced in favor of morality as the focus shifts to the individual's motives. Moralizing values redeem both the upper-class and the lower-class characters. Indeed, upper-class and lower-class distinctions are blurred by the moralization process. By rhetorically shifting the focus from upward mobility to morality, the films leave the American Dream unscathed and implicitly suggest that the American Dream is still a reality and certainly a worthy goal for all.

The Dominant Class Is Not Immoral or Exploitative

Films that constitute the theme moralizing the material ultimately question class differences entirely by implicitly saying, "How can elite people be better when the working-class person obviously has the value system that heals the upper class person?" Yet the upper class, as a whole, is never attributed with innate immorality, which means that the myth of the United States as a classless society remains intact despite the very issues of classed characters that are raised in the motion pictures. Class unity levels the differences between the characters. Further, what may be cinematically suggested as a class difference is eventually shown to be inconsequential. The true natures of the individuals prove that none is better than others in a social class sense and that all can live together in harmony. This is an ethos of classless America. Cloud argues, "[T]he discourse of therapy serves a broader, cultural function for mass audiences: to offer psychological ministration for the ills of society" (1998, xiv). The

films contain a basic rhetorical argument that there are no class limitations in America and that success and failure are still determined on the individual level, not by an unfair social system of political policies or practices. Therefore, the obvious economic tribulations facing U.S. society are rhetorically relabeled—from social harms to individual problems—and the therapy solves the unfair conditions using a pleasant interpersonal relationship.

The upper class is never demonized. An important step to understanding a fundamental fact of class in American society is to realize that Americans do not adhere to a structurally based concept of class. A proletarian identification is not solidly grounded in the American ideology of class. Although Americans understand that there are differences between upper-class and working-class people, they do not see these differences as rooted in a Marxist or related notion of dominance or exploitation of one class by another. These class differences become matters of taste or interest and, although they may be linked to a specific group (e.g., the country club set), they are not considered to be what determines success or failure. Although the idea is related to Bourdieu's (1984) *habitus*, where the habits we learn help us deal with our everyday lives, the concept of taste in these films is much more superficial. For example, in *Working Girl*, Tess gets a new hairstyle to look like an executive, not because she sees the world differently. Tess makes a superficial change by cutting her hair, but she does not change her view of the world or her understanding of what is right and wrong. The important criteria that drive these narratives revolve around issues of morality and character, not taste, fashion, or style. Taste cultures are used as filmic shorthand to establish class differences in a cinematically economic way, but then the films show that taste cultures are easily learned and imitated via consumerism. The rhetoric argues that there are no real differences, no structural inequalities between the classes. In other words, there are bad rich folks; but they are not bad because they are rich.

In fact, rhetorically moralizing values demonstrates that malevolent people in the upper class are evil because they adhere to the wrong values, not because they are purposefully trying to exploit the working class. When upper-class characters refuse to be moralized, they are sanc-

tioned and relegated to the category of supercilious snobs and explained away because of individual shortcomings rather than as exemplification of any innate upper-class exploitation. Often this means that upper-class individuals are punished; but for the most part, they are just shown as immoral. For example, in *Pretty Woman*, Edward's friend Philip is punched in the face and fired for his immorality, but what happens to him after that is irrelevant to the movie because he has been relegated to a position of insignificance.

These dramas present conflicts as personal problems of success for the characters wherein the films' morality demonstrates how they can achieve upward mobility without relinquishing the ethical and moral superiority of their lower-class life and values. In these movies, classlessness is expounded as a conviction that upper-class characters are not any better than the lower-class ones. In fact, the lower-class characters are often shown as morally superior and personally more fulfilled, while the upper-class characters are often shown as morally inferior and personally unfulfilled—thus furthering the films' role as a leveler of class distinctions in American society. But the upper-class characters are never innately evil because of their class; if they were, there could be no successful cross-class relationships.

Therefore, upper-class characters are transformed and redeemed through a purification of their motives. Once their motives are transformed from whatever self-serving value system they subscribe to, they embrace the correct motives and find fulfillment. Once their individual morality has been healed, their class affiliations are irrelevant. This type of transformation counsels the audience to look inwardly to their own motives rather than outwardly to an inegalitarian, class-structured society. Although the specific moralizing of motives and redeeming of characters vary from film to film, the key issue of redeeming the characters through moralizing their motives is played out time and again.

Working-Class Values Are Lauded

All the films suggest that working-class values are the most appropriate for all Americans. The entire specific set of proper working-class motives

is never explicitly spelled out in one film; however, the value system is related to an idea of a working-class morality and value system. These values revolve around various themes rather than a specific list of codified commandments. They involve many different aspects of life in the United States. In general, the movies uphold working-class values of hard work and self-sacrifice over the indulgences of the privileged upper classes. These narratives are inclined to denounce upper-class immoderation. They accomplish this by showing how the upper-class characters' lives are empty of meaning, devoid of purpose, barren of healthy relationships, and especially bereft of true love. Therefore, interpersonal and family failures abound in the upper-class characters. Nonetheless, despite this sad situation, the upper class is committed to preserving appearances, pretenses, and feigned relationships. It is revealing that the protagonists of our motion picture mythology embrace lower-class morality and expose any pretense to the superiority of the upper class, which is accomplished though work-related and romance-related plots.

Work-related themes revolve around the importance of production over profit, teamwork, and the value of honest endeavors over dishonest undertakings. These values are affirmed in the transformation and redemption of the characters. For example, the importance of production over profit is affirmed in *Pretty Woman,* when Edward learns to use his resources to help build ships rather than dismantle manufacturing industries that provide jobs for working-class Americans, and likewise in *Wall Street,* where corporate raiding is shown to be immoral and honest yeomanry is valorized. *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Breaking Away* highlight the importance of teamwork over selfish success, and Jeffrey's learning to value his father's lessons of honest work over Brody's insistence on easy and dishonest undertakings makes this point in *The Flamingo Kid.*

Romantic lines of action and their association with a working-class value system primarily revolve around the themes of true love and community (including family), as seen in many of the films. For example, true love is at the center of the therapy for Edward in *Pretty Woman,* Rose in *Titanic,* Nick in *Flashdance,* Bill in *Mrs. Winterbourne,* and Chris in *Maid in Manhattan.* In all of these films, the upper-class person finds

happiness and escapes his or her personal misery or unhappiness by finding true love with a lower-class person who is much more desirable, in all ways, than any other upper-class character. Community is valued in *Passion Fish, Good Will Hunting,* and *The Fisher King,* as more platonic relationships are the focus. Yet the therapy remains the same, as all the members of the group benefit from the cross-class relationship. Of course, a traditional definition of family is at the heart of the healing in *Breaking Away* and *The Flamingo Kid*; but the results are nonetheless the same in more nontraditional communities, such as the diversity embraced in *Passion Fish.*

Exonerating lower-class morality operates as therapy for those who believe in the American Dream but are structurally denied its realization. The films valorize lower-class morality without questioning the basic value and desirability of upward mobility. In short, these motion pictures navigate class by dividing the moral substance of the heroes from the bourgeois accoutrements of success and money. Regardless of how rich the working-class characters may become, they will always hold to their working-class values because they understand that from that morality comes success. Further, these films argue that the only real difference in the classes is a superficial difference based on consumer cultures and fashion. The media have a consumer ethos that suggests that the means for upward mobility has become based in style, fashion, and image achieved via consumerism (Lears 1983; Lipsitz 1986). Berger states that "[C]apitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible. . . . Today . . . it is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable" (1972, 154). Depending on the assumption that most Americans cannot rely on the ill-fated death of a Patricia Winterbourne or a convenient skiing accident like Katherine Parker's, then the films suggest that adopting the style and image of the upper class will aid one in a bid for the American Dream. Therefore, even though the films prescribe moral substance and perseverance as the key to upward mobility, they also communicate that the upper-class image is indeed a favorable goal as long as one does not lose one's moral substance. Gated neighborhoods, expensive cars, fashionable clothes, trendy restaurants, servants, tasteful makeup,

lavish jewelry, and classy hairstyles are understood as signifiers of the upper class. What better way, in a consumer culture, of transcending class is there than by purchasing your clothes in Manhattan rather than in Brooklyn or by buying your shampoo at Neiman Marcus instead of at Wal-Mart? By focusing on consumerism, the films individualize inequalities and further deny social problems. Hence, differences in economic income and wealth are reduced to individual taste and style.

Class Is Not Social in America, It Is Individual

In all of these movies, class identity is experienced in terms of individual success and failure. The key to understanding this lies in realizing that Americans do not have a widely accepted language for a group-based class identity. The rhetoric of success and failure is linked to the only identity that is allowed in American ideology: the self. Americans neither think of themselves as workers in the classic proletarian sense of the word nor do they desire this identity. The prevailing, predominate, and preeminent social class understanding that Americans have of themselves is the necessarily ambiguous moniker of "middle-class," which for all practical, daily, coping, life situations means not-classed. Not-classed is the overshadowing ideology of class in the United States. Starting with this huge middle-class ideology allows Americans to negotiate individual failure according to the American Dream. The rhetoric of these films demonstrates how their everyday economic problems are removed from an idea of a rigid, class-structured society and placed within a framework of individual success and failure.

Simultaneously, the definition of success is necessarily ambiguous. Economic success is one form of achievement; but without personal happiness, it is meaningless (e.g., *Pretty Woman*). Personal strength in overcoming adversity is important but does not offer the peace of mind that family and community provide (e.g., *Working Girl, An Officer and a Gentleman, The Fisher King*). Immoral attainment of the good life provides only fleeting and false happiness, while adherence to moral values provides positive solutions to life situations (e.g., *The Flamingo Kid, The Firm, Wall Street*).

In other words, success and failure are measured on issues of individual happiness and morality. The rhetoric of these films counsels an individual therapeutic. They are prescriptions for individual lives. As people struggle with their life situations, these films offer narratives of personal success. The individual's own particular life situations can be compared to and better understood by the ways the individual characters solve their own problems. The dramatism of the American ideology of class places the emphasis on the individual as the agent of change. Make no mistake, all of the narratives are ultimately about success for the filmic protagonists: even when they fail at a bid for upward mobility, they still succeed because they are personally renewed by their moral working-class values. The rhetoric of these films, regardless of their outcomes, is always that this result is the best thing for this individual.

Understanding the individuated rhetoric of how the class-self operates is a key advantage to the therapeutic approach. Since "we demand that our enterprises and institutions offer the possibility of individual success, and our institutions have made repairing individual failure chief among their enterprises" (Payne 1989b, xi), we must, in order to fully understand life in the United States, look to the rhetoric of individuated success and failure. This book elucidated several important points concerning this rhetoric of contemporary Hollywood film.

Social Justice

The media play an important role in forming individual identity, shaping behavior and views of the world (Kellner 1995). Rhetoric of class and class relationships in film counsels a belief in a classless society and reliance upon individual success over and above collective action. Class and the media are inextricably intertwined in contemporary American society. In this section, I argue that a more egalitarian social structure will benefit all interests in the United States.

An imbalanced social structure that advantages the smallest group of the American population has allowed for the upper classes in America to distance themselves in socioeconomic and cultural ways from the vast majority of Americans. This trend continues as we enter the new

millennium. 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 1999, 104) and has worsened since that decade (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005, 383). Despite the economic boom of the 1990s, weekly wages in real dollars had been declining since the early 1970s (Miringoff and Miringoff 1999, 98); and since 2001, "the wage growth of many workers has continued to slow and is now falling behind inflation" (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005, 19). Moreover, the United States has the "worst record" of child poverty of the industrialized countries (Miringoff and Miringoff 1999, 80). The richest 10 percent of families own over 70 percent of American wealth. Perhaps even more telling is that the top one-half percent hold over 35 percent of the wealth (Mantsios 1992). Further, since the beginning of the new millennium, the economic woes of the working class and the poor have increasingly affected the middle class (Ehrenreich 2005). These steady economic losses for the last thirty-five years leave Americans in a situation in stark contrast to the U.S. public's cherished belief in the American Dream of success, so much so that Ehrenreich (2005, 237) refers to it as the "disappearance of the American Dream."

In the later twentieth century, the upper classes made historic gains in wealth accumulation. Therefore, it might be reasonable to assume that to continue in this manner will continue to benefit the upper class. However, economists and sociologists alike have argued that vast structural differences, like the ones we are experiencing in the United States, can actually dismantle the very structures that encourage them. Braun explains, "Evidence from sociology indicates that political extremism and violence does result when income inequality increases. . . . [Therefore,] the very foundations of democracy may depend upon a government's ability to maintain the economic well-being of its population" (1991, 4).

The last few decades were marked by a rise in political extremism and violence. A cultural indicator of the fear of violence is the security industry, which accounts for a multibillion dollar a year business dedicated to the fact that Americans feel less safe now than ever before. Further, our

occupational vocabulary includes the term "going postal," which has become an everyday label for people who are angry about their employment situations, especially downsizing and job shrinkage. Likewise, domestic terrorism has become a household term to describe the social violence perpetuated by Americans who feel alienated by the government or society. Braun counsels that in

> Countries which follow a strategy of development which ignores distributional equality are more likely to experience higher levels of mass political violence . . . this is called the "Brazil Model"—named after the country so closely identified with rapid accumulation of wealth . . . while virtually ignoring the welfare of the poorer masses. (1991, 4–5)

According to this model of social unrest, grossly unequal distribution of resources can lead to mass violence in societies that allow the upper percentage of their population to accumulate wealth while ignoring and/or dismantling systems of welfare for their citizenry. Although a direct correlation to U.S. society is not suggested, advancing the economic policies of the past few decades could further disenfranchise and alienate a large portion of Americans. Even though these citizens will not likely turn to mass political violence, the result will, no doubt, hurt society and weaken our democracy.

To continue to dismantle the welfare system, eliminate equalizing policies like affirmative action, and remove the safety net of Social Security, while not responsibly providing for those members of the population who are structurally oppressed due to race, class, and gender, is a move that may encourage social instability. Sawhill (2000, 33) argues that there is mobility in the United States, both up and down the social ladder, and argues, "Further progress would seem to hinge, importantly, on improving the effectiveness of elementary and secondary education and ensuring that children from more disadvantaged families receive a larger share of whatever resources are devoted to this purpose." Yet, social programs continue to be under attack.

Ehrenreich, who has written extensively about the politics of the late twentieth century and its effect on American society, argues that the current trend in the United States is indeed bad for all Americans: "Everyone

has a stake in creating a less anxious, more egalitarian society. . . . For without a potent political alternative, we are likely to continue our slide toward a society divided between the hungry and the overfed, the hopeless and the have-it-alls" (1990, 207). Ehrenreich continues,

> there will be no mainstream, peaceable political outlets for the frustration of the declining middle class or the desperation of those at the bottom. Instead . . . there will be more crime, more exotic forms of political and religious sectarianism, and ultimately, that we will no longer be one nation, but two" (1990, 207)

The situation is bad and is worsening. Dalphin (1987) reports that most Americans earn less than $20,000. A yearly income of $20,000 puts the requirements of a middle-class lifestyle out of reach of these families who must struggle economically. Shulman (2003, 69) explains that "America's low-wage workers are mostly white, female, high school educated, and with family responsibilities." Poverty-stricken families must develop survival strategies saddening to imagine; that "a large percentage of dog food in America is consumed . . . by people is only one example" (Dalphin 1987, 1). Shulman (2003, 6) explains that "Low-wage service workers have borne the brunt of the cutbacks in our economy in the form of lost jobs and reductions in hours and pay." The blame for this situation is the American mythos of class that argues that it is the individual's fault. Yet it is time to put the myth of social mobility to rest, as "there is virtually no mobility from the non-upper class into the upper class" (Dalphin 1987, 73). Shulman (2003, 7) agrees: "The reigning American mythology that being in a low-wage job is a temporary situation, that mobility will solve the problems, undermines such concern. But the evidence belies the myth. . . . most [workers] will never move into the middle class. Their children will suffer the same fate." It is prudent that we, as a nation, give credence to the idea that our increase in social inequality may be playing a large part in the increase of social instability.

America, in terms of social inequality, is worse off than it was thirty years ago in some respects and is making backward strides in others. In terms of wages, most Americans are no better off, or are worse off, than

they were in the 1960s and early 1970s, as downsizing, layoffs, and part-time service jobs have replaced the hopes of a better life with a fear of sliding down the social ladder. Although racial equality made important strides with the Civil Rights Movement, people of color are still the most hurt by unfair economic policies; and the measures that were designed to fight the war on poverty are being dismantled along with affirmative action. Sexual equality has also improved; but women are still underpaid and undervalued in our culture, with women of color suffering the greatest. In 1995, Davey wrote, "Congress appears on the brink of pouring billions of dollars into even more prisons while simultaneously slashing spending on programs designed to alleviate poverty" (ix). Davey continues, "The proposals made by the political right concerning 'three strikes you're out' laws and the termination of welfare for millions of current recipients would have been considered too draconian to even contemplate just a few years ago" (1995, ix). Further, the measures that individual states have undertaken to dismantle the welfare system has made conditions even worse for many Americans. Davey argues that "increasing the number of Americans who already live below the poverty line almost certainly will increase the rate of crime in the United States . . . [and] that increasing the number . . . living behind bars . . . will do virtually nothing to reduce crime" (1995, x). We are entering the new millennium poised for a tragic social disaster. Hojman (2000) explains that a reversal of the current trends would improve the situation: "Concerns with income mobility have to do with concerns about economic efficiency, social unease, and political stability. . . . There is considerable evidence that economic growth is faster where there is less income inequality." Hojman continues, "Very convincing arguments have been put forward that, other things being equal, more even income distribution will reduce social unease and increase political stability" (194). Therefore, it is in everyone's interest to address social inequality now rather than later and to move the burden of failure from the individual to our society. If addressed in ways that will promote real economic recovery for all Americans, then the results will be democratic change. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of all this is that many of the Americans who are being hurt the most have become politically indifferent. In

other words, they have already decided that legitimate social change through political means is impossible.

The Problem of Political Indifference

We should be concerned by the fact that many Americans have already decided that legitimate political change is not possible and that participation in the democratic process is not worth their while. If Americans do not believe that they can change their lives for the better through the democratic process, then what alternatives are left for them? Ehrenreich (1990, 210) sees many young men in America as "marginal men." These men have seen their earnings drop nationwide and live between two worlds, "one that [they] aspire to and one that is dying, and neither of which [they] can afford" (1990, 210). If they have no hope of improving their state through reasonable means, then they may turn to violence: "[I]f they can't find [respect] in work, or in a working-class life-style that is no longer honored, they'll extract it from someone weaker. . . . They'll find a victim" (Ehrenreich 1990, 212).

The democratic model enables Americans to elect representatives in government, but this model has been rejected by many Americans. Phillips pointed out that "the largest number of non-voters make less then $25,000 thus showing that who is elected is obviously not going to make a difference in their lives" (1990, 25). Davis echoes these reports: "[I]n no other capitalist country is mass political abstentionism as fully developed as in the United States" (1986, 3). Therefore, what can be the alternative for those who have abandoned the two-party political system when they are finally forced to seek some social mode of relief? Phillips suggests that since average Americans see Washington as irrelevant, the status quo can control the political environment "until disillusionment can no longer be avoided" (1990, xi). In *The American Dream: Can It Survive the 21st Century*, Daleiden (1999, 13) argues: "Neither political party . . . possess[es] the vision and leadership that our nation will need to effectively meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. One reason may be that the overwhelming majority of American people have removed themselves from the difficult task of self-government." The vot-

ing trend of the Americans most affected by rising inequality does not encourage a view that they will look to political candidates and voting as a means of social justice. As McChesney argues, participatory self-government is aided when "there are not significant disparities in economic wealth and property ownership across the society" (1997, 5). As America's social inequality grows greater, the vast majority of Americans who are affected adversely along lines of race, class, and gender will need a social means for social justice.

Yet moves away from social justice have gained momentum in Washington in the past several years. For example, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas tried to convince Americans that "conservative ideology and the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations are morally acceptable and politically advantageous" (West 1994, 82). Thomas's position on affirmative action kept African Americans out of law school even though the same programs aided him (Cose 1998). Lewis states, "[T]he National Bar Association opposed [Thomas's] . . . confirmation to the court in 1991, largely over his conservative views and outspoken opposition to affirmative action programs' (1998, A14). Justice Thomas has been accused by Judge Higginbotham, the former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, as having "done more to turn back the clock on racial progress than any other African American public official in the history of this country" (Lewis 1998, A14).

Moreover, the middle class is feeling pressures from both technological and legislative changes. According to Herbert (2005, A19), "Revolutionary improvements in technology, increasingly globalized trade, the competition of low-wage workers overseas and increased immigration here at home, the decline in manufacturing, the weakening of the labor movement, outsourcing and numerous other factors have left Americans with very little leverage to use against employers." Ehrenreich (2005, 236) argues that

> the American middle class is under attack as never before. For example, the 2005 federal bankruptcy bill . . . will condemn more and more of the unemployed to a life of debt peonage. Meanwhile, escalating college costs threaten to bar their own children from white-collar

> careers. And as company pensions disappear, the president is campaigning vigorously to eviscerate Social Security.

The attack on affirmative action and other economic redistributive programs are reversing what little progress was being made in a worthwhile attempt to at least enable some Americans to better overcome the structural obstacles placed in their paths. In order to make positive social changes in the twenty-first century, all politicians will need to make economic justice a social priority. In doing so, research suggests that our democracy will be strengthened; and our economic growth will be faster and more sustainable.

A Critical Media Pedagogy

Social equality should be a priority for America, and efforts should be made to increase Americans' involvement in the democratic process. Can the mass media do anything to help the cause of social equality in America? Since the mass media are partially responsible for furthering a view that legitimates social inequality, then the media can also aid the cause of social justice in the United States.

The struggle between dominant ideologies and challenges to them make the mass media a contested terrain. Yet, the dominant view in the mass media is one that supports a belief in the American Dream of success and a classless society that does little to encourage social equality and much to divert attention away from social policies and governmental programs that could lessen the gap between America's classes. So much so that in 1951, Mills stated, "The image of success and its individuated psychology are the most lively aspects of popular culture and the greatest diversion from politics" (336).

Ross's 1998 investigation into the silent era of film and the working-class cinema it produced ends with a look at how film could change in order to better represent an alternative view to the dominant ideology. Ross concludes:

> Movies can help us imagine a different world, perhaps even a better world and a better life. Yet too many filmmakers use their remarkable

> powers in trivial ways. . . . We live in an age where the adage "You can't fight City Hall" seems to dominate political life; an age in which voter turnout is abysmally low and shrinking; an age in which Americans feel powerless to change forces they often cannot see or understand. . . . Imagine a cinema which, in addition to entertaining people, offered them a blueprint for change; a cinema that offered people—whether they call themselves working class or middle class—some idea of what to do and how to fight back in a work world that is constantly "downsizing" . . . movies could once again inspire people to change the world and show them how to do it. . . . That is the ultimate genius of cinema: it can take a politically blind population and offer them the gift of sight. (1998, 256–57)

Ross's support of a political cinema of hope and possibility would do a great deal to aid the cause of social equality in America. However, the filmmakers' vision is often thwarted by a filmmaking system that rejects politically risky projects in favor of less controversial properties.

The economics of Hollywood filmmaking are such that films that are deemed too radical have little or no chance of being made and independent films have less of a chance at being screened to a large audience. In order to facilitate a change in films, real change must first be made in the system itself. Hegemony counsels that this type of industry change is difficult and that the socioeconomic ties between the filmmaking industry and a conglomerate-minded system works to keep oppositional voices silent. Hence, a common view of movies is that "Cinema in the United States enjoys a dubious heritage of being an organ of conventional wisdom and simplistic feel-good entertainment. It perpetuates this pattern and has a deleterious effect on a population increasingly apathetic and programmed" (Shafer 2001, 30).

The most productive means for changing filmmaking is not an effort to radically change the end result (the finished film), although, as Ross points out, that would be worthy goal; but instead, the best place to start is with the filmmakers, long before they become involved in the business. In short, I argue for ongoing critical media pedagogy of class that can instruct Americans in the importance of these issues and aid the cause of social equality.

Kellner has argued that including studies of the media that highlight issues concerning race, class, and gender "is part of a critical media pedagogy that . . . can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and enable them to struggle for alternative cultures and political change" (1995, 15). The significance of my work lies in its ability to aid in the discussion of class issues in such a way as to improve media literacy and encourage media activism. The socioeconomic and political issues at stake go beyond the media but can never be fully separated from it. Sholle (1994, 15) explains that "Pedagogy is not simply about 'teaching technique'; rather it refers to all those practices that define what is important to know, how it is to be known, and how this production of knowledge constructs social identities." The social, political, economic, and cultural implications of this definition are far reaching and suggest that "the pedagogical is practiced not just in schools, but in the family, public discourse, the church, the media, etc." (Sholle 1994, 15).

Further, incorporating critical media pedagogy into schools of mass communication and film schools can help to inform future producers about these issues. Uninformed people view degrees in mass communication and the media as technical skill training where students are prepared for entry-level production and writing jobs or artistic environments where students can hone their craft. Sholle explains: "The notion that higher education should advance the goals of democracy is a given; however, neoconservatives and liberal theories of education have gone nowhere in defining what 'democracy' is. Neither have these viewpoints explained what the role of education is in the development of democracy" (1994, 10). Sholle continues, "Neoconservatives are content to leave democracy undefined and to assume that it already exists. Education for democracy, then, is simply a matter of reproducing the present state of affairs and rehearsing the givens of current political rhetoric." But Sholle finds that liberals are equally at fault:

> For liberals, democracy does involve the development of participation in political affairs and education takes its place in this through personal development of the student. However, John Dewey's notion of creative democracy and education as supportive of social construction

> and the revitalization of community have disappeared from current liberal viewpoints. (1994, 10)

Therefore, Sholle concludes, "In the current liberal rhetoric, democracy functions in the political institutions of U.S. society, but the inegalitarian, hierarchical constitution of the economy is ignored" (1994, 10). Of course, a critical pedagogy cannot stop in the college classroom; but it certainly must be in the college classroom. The study of media in schools must include the social, political, economic, and cultural focus that elucidates the importance of media and democracy in the United States. As long as administrators ignore the need for offering sound theoretical teaching to students concerning the role of the media in democracy, the "dominant power relations of race, class and gender, and sexual preference are reproduced, moment-by-moment, in popular film and television" by media professionals trained in a "value-neutral and atheoretical pedagogy" (Sholle 1994, 16).

Further, the use of a critical media pedagogy work against the hegemonic functions of a value-neutral education. Sholle explains a

> proposal for a different practice that hopes for a better future . . . where: 1) education serves in developing the ability of people to become active citizens, working toward a more radical democracy; 2) the concerns and experiences of diverse groups are addressed through dialogue; 3) theory and practice are integrated in developing practices of critical reflection and concrete action; 4) intellectuals' functions become reconnected to the concrete concerns of the community and the nation, not through disinterested neutrality, but through moral and political action. (1994, 27)

By instituting a critical media pedagogy into mass media curriculum, media professionals may learn that part of their careers is to further a moral cause and political action rather than simply providing programming for consumption. Education and the mass media are often pointed to as important centers of ideological reproduction and maintenance; therefore, critical media pedagogy works to encourage a more active democracy in both. Consequently, the significance of this study lays in its incorporation within critical media pedagogy that ties the narrative

world of fictional film to the difficult business of social change as America works for social equality in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, media literacy needs to become a top priority in the U.S. public and private primary educational system. The benefits of teaching young people values is widely accepted in the United States. The idea is that by raising children's awareness of issues such as child abuse and drug addiction, we can help them avoid future problems. Parents routinely teach their children important religious and secular values in the belief that these lessons will benefit the children throughout their lives. Therefore, it seems counterproductive for society to ignore basic media literacy in schools when research shows that children are the most vulnerable audience to media influence. By instigating a program of media literacy in elementary schools, society could theoretically accomplish two goals: (1) Teach young people how to understand mediated messages so that they can better embrace or reject them. (2) Encourage young people to use the media as a resource for being more involved in democracy.

Finally, the media should also be involved in these two goals. First, the media can do a better job of producing programming that will help young people understand the media and its role in society. This level of self-reflexivity is not impossible for the media. Second, the media can create programming that encourages young people to be active in their democracy. The media should produce high-quality, entertaining programs that teach young people how to properly use the media and how to be active democratic citizens; and the media can make these available through both commercial and noncommercial venues. The end result can be a media that contributes in meaningful ways to strengthening our democracy and advancing issues of social equality.

A Final Movie

In the 2002 French film *Décalage horaire* (*Jet Lag*), the main character, Rose (Juliette Binoche), opens the film by telling a story. During her childhood she was punished by her parents for watching the Hollywood film *Roman Holiday* (1953) at a Left Bank cinema:

> Not only did I skip school, but American movies were off-limits. Dad found them silly and Mom said they weren't true to life. Okay, the poor get rich, the rich have problems, immigrants are legalized, wars end, even the dead come back, and whores marry millionaires. If only it could all be true. Andy Warhol . . . said that everyone should be famous for 15 minutes. . . . I always felt I had the right to a whole day; a whole day when my life would be like an American movie.

This quaint story of childhood innocence elegantly explains the complex ideology of the American Dream in contemporary Hollywood cinema and its message of a stable egalitarian U.S. social structure despite the harsh realities of social and class discrimination. Movies communicate the prevailing ideology of class in America in attractive and entertaining ways. Americans want to believe the American Dream, they've been taught to believe it, and, finally, like Rose, they want their lives to mirror the Hollywood version of happiness. Unfortunately, their desire for the ideological dream can inhibit their ability to call for the important social changes that would make the land of the American Dream a better place for all Americans.

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