

## TURNING PROSTITUTION INTO A FAIRY-TALE: THE CINDERELLA MYTH IN *PRETTY WOMAN*<sup>25</sup>

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the ideological implications behind the romanticized portrayal of prostitution in contemporary cinema, with a particular focus on Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990). As a cultural medium, film serves to both reflect and shape societal imaginaries. According to Laura Mulvey (1975), the male gaze is the guiding logic of dominant visual culture, which degrades women into mere objects of desire instead of complete people. Sex workers are often portrayed in simplistic positions like the "happy hooker," the "tragic victim," or the "redeemed lover." This is especially true when it comes to their representation in media. In many cases, these clichés gloss over the structural inequality and material hardships that keep the prostitution industry going. Cobo (2017) argues that among the most pervasive and normalized manifestations of patriarchal dominance is prostitution.

This view holds that *Pretty Woman* is a perfect example of what Balló and Pérez (1995, pp. 193-207) call the "Cinderella scheme"—the story

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of a downtrodden woman who is “rescued” by a powerful and wealthy man and then rises to new heights as a result of their love for one another. This framework reinforces the idea of a male savior complex, transforming prostitution into a matter of romantic destiny or individual agency, thus obscuring the broader economic and gender-based structures underlying such stories.

Ultimately, this chapter highlights how fairy-tale narratives in contemporary cinema frequently mask the material realities of sex work, substituting critical reflection with romantic idealization. Drawing upon feminist film theory, this analysis demonstrates how these portrayals validate systems of commodification and uphold traditional gender dynamics, presented deceptively as narratives of female empowerment.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

- To critically examine the cinematic representation of prostitution, focusing on how contemporary films frequently offer sanitized and glamorized portrayals that obscure the harsh realities of the sex industry (Campbell, 2006; Ayala, 2012).
- To analyze the ideological functions performed by stereotypical portrayals of female sex workers, highlighting the perpetuation of patriarchal structures through archetypes such as the “happy hooker” or the “redeemed prostitute” (Balló & Pérez, 1995; Hirschman & Stern, 1994).
- To reveal the patriarchal implications embedded in the Cinderella scheme (Balló & Pérez, 1995, pp. 193-207), focusing specifically on the trope of male saviorism evident in films like *Pretty Woman*, which reinforces normative gender hierarchies and the illusion that women’s liberation can be mediated through economic dependence on men.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in feminist film theory and structural analyses of gender representation in popular cinema. A key point of departure is Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on the male gaze, which argues that classical narrative film positions women primarily as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed heterosexual male spectator (Mulvey, 1975). Her insights remain essential for understanding how films like *Pretty Woman* construct femininity through aesthetic codes that eroticize vulnerability and frame female sexuality as both desirable and consumable.

Cinema, therefore, functions simultaneously as a mirror and a shaper of society. Its visual language, mediated through lighting, framing, editing, and *mise-en-scène*, actively participates in constructing gendered imaginaries. When the camera zooms in on a woman's legs, accentuating them through soft lighting or low-angle framing, it does not merely reflect an existing beauty but actively produces it, conforming to culturally dominant standards. Though these cinematic strategies appear neutral, they embody significant ideological implications. Within patriarchal discourses, such portrayals frequently transform prostitution from a condition of exploitation or marginality into a vision of glamour,

In addition to Mulvey's framework, this analysis engages with critical approaches to the cinematic representation of prostitution, particularly those that view it not as an individual choice or neutral occupation, but as a discursive construct shaped by ideology. For instance, Cobo (2017) reads prostitution as part of a symbolic system in which women's bodies are made exchangeable through patriarchal and capitalist logics. Her structural critique sheds light on the intersections of class, gender, and sexualization within the narrative and visual economies of cinema. Additionally, Campbell's typology (2006) of prostitute characters in film—ranging from tragic victims and empowered rebels to romantic heroines—offers a productive framework for analyzing character construction. These archetypes transcend their narrative roles, performing ideological functions that shape audience perceptions regarding sexuality, empowerment, and moral redemption.

Additional insight is provided by Ruti (2016), who critiques the ideological packaging of romance as empowerment, and Erens (1990), who highlights how cinema helps reproduce dominant narratives about gender and sexuality. These perspectives enable a reading of *Pretty Woman* as a cultural artifact that masks systems of power beneath the veneer of individual agency and romantic fantasy. As previous studies have shown, the romantic and visual framing of *Pretty Woman* aligns with broader trends in the depiction of sex work in mainstream cinema (Ruti, 2016; Hirschman & Stern, 1994).

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology rooted in feminist cultural analysis. The study focuses on *Pretty Woman* (1990) as a case study of how prostitution is framed in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The film is analyzed through a combination of close reading, visual analysis, and discourse analysis.

Methodologically, the approach includes:

- Narrative analysis, examining how the Cinderella trope is adapted to represent economic and sexual mobility.
- Visual analysis, assessing the codes of dress, gesture, framing, and composition that construct the female body as spectacle.
- Discourse analysis, attending to how the dialogue and interactions reproduce or subvert normative gender roles.
- Contextual interpretation, situating the film within broader discourses on class, gender, and romantic ideology.

The main aim is to interrogate the ways in which prostitution is constructed, sanitized, or idealized in cinematic representation. By doing so, the study seeks to illuminate the cultural work performed by such narratives and the ideological tensions they encode.

## 5. FILM TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: *PRETTY WOMAN* (1990)

### 5.1. PLOT, STRUCTURE, AND SYMBOLIC CONTEXT

*Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) narrates the encounter between Vivian Ward, a street prostitute in Los Angeles, and Edward Lewis, a wealthy corporate magnate. Initially conceived as a drama about sexual exploitation and class disparity<sup>26</sup>, the project was reconverted into a romantic comedy during production. This narrative shift exemplifies a wider cultural phenomenon in which accounts of female subordination are reinterpreted through romantic fantasy. Martínez Sariago (2011) highlights how Disney's cultural influence has significantly shaped hegemonic femininity by promoting passive, beauty-focused, heterosexual models of female identity. In this context, prostitution is reframed, moving away from its structural marginalization to be reimagined as a fulfilling fairy-tale experience grounded in emotional reward. The result is a commercially successful and culturally influential film that reshaped the figure of the sex worker into a glamorous, sanitized, and ultimately lovable character.

The narrative unfolds as a modern fairy tale that replicates the structural logic of the Cinderella myth (Balló & Pérez, 1995): a marginalized woman is “rescued” by a powerful man who introduces her into a world of wealth, refinement, and love. The film uses visual contrasts between spaces (Hollywood Boulevard vs. Beverly Hills) and class-coded costumes (leather boots and miniskirt vs. elegant evening gowns) to highlight Vivian's initial outsider status and her gradual integration into elite society. These elements serve not only to construct the protagonist's arc but also to dramatize the symbolic crossing of social boundaries—mediated, crucially, by male power.

This shift in narrative tone was not merely aesthetic but ideological: it reframed prostitution as a space of emotional fulfillment and upward

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<sup>26</sup> The original script by J. F. Lawton, entitled *3000* (instead of *Pretty Woman*), dealt with controversial issues, including Vivian's addiction to drugs. This version didn't include a happy ending: Edward throws Vivien out of his car and drives off while Vivian and her friend Kit travel to Disneyland.

mobility rather than one of marginalization. The makeover sequence, the shopping scenes, and the romantic fantasy embedded in *Pretty Woman* align the film with what Radner (2011) defines as neo-feminist cinema—a genre that repackages traditional gender roles through the aesthetics of consumer culture and the illusion of agency. Producer Laura Ziskin, in a 1991 *People* magazine article, emphasized her desire to give the fairy tale a modern twist: “I didn't want a movie whose message would be that some nice guy will come along and give you nice clothes and lots of money and make you happy.” The revised ending, punctuated by the line “She rescues him right back,” was meant to signal reciprocity. However, this apparent reversal ultimately reinforces rather than subverts the saviour-rescued dynamic, embedding it in a feel-good formula that obscures deeper social contradictions.

The symbolic geography of the film—Vivian’s movement from Hollywood Boulevard to Beverly Hills—highlights class distinctions through visual contrasts: miniskirts and streetwear are set against designer dresses and five-star hotel suites. Even their cultural preferences reinforce this divide: Vivian watches *I Love Lucy*<sup>27</sup>, while Edward prefers *La Traviata*<sup>28</sup>. These oppositions are momentarily bridged by a shared cynicism—“We both screw people for money”—which reveals an undercurrent of transactional logic common to both sex and capitalism. As Campbell (2006, p. 326) notes, the class rift in *Pretty Woman* simply distinguishes those who sell their bodies from those who sell their souls. Notwithstanding his economic power, Edward is portrayed as

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<sup>27</sup> *I Love Lucy* was a popular American sitcom (1951–1957) starring Lucille Ball as a quirky, working-class housewife whose comedic misadventures became a cultural touchstone of mid-20th-century television.

<sup>28</sup> The relationship between *Pretty Woman* and *La Traviata* constitutes a case of deliberate intertextuality, marked by what has been called a “contract of intertextuality”—an explicit signal by the author to acknowledge a source text. In the film, Vivian and Edward attend a performance of Verdi’s *La Traviata*, which is itself an operatic adaptation of Dumas fils’ novel *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848), through its intermediate theatrical version. The trajectory follows a cultural chain: real-life courtesan Marie Duplessis > *La Dame aux Camélias* > stage play > Verdi’s opera > *Pretty Woman*. This lineage, which transforms a historical figure into a literary and then cinematic archetype, exemplifies what Dabezies (1994, 2004) classifies as a third-type myth: a fictional construct rooted in a hystorical character. This intertextual lineage, which opens up a rich field of symbolic and ideological correspondences, would certainly warrant a more extensive, standalone analysis.

emotionally dissatisfied, while Vivian—despite being a prostitute—embodies the emotional authenticity and human warmth he lacks. As Winn (2007) argues, such films promote an idealized vision of the “American dream” in which upward mobility and emotional fulfillment are achieved through individual charm and romantic coupling, rather than through structural change.

This supposed subversion remains indeed confined within patriarchal norms. As Gerassi (2015) argues, the romanticization of sex work as a site of personal empowerment often conceals the structural inequalities and systems of exploitation that underpin it<sup>29</sup>. In this sense, the film’s resolution upholds—rather than dismantles—the myth of salvation through love and money. Notably, the film stages a visual and ideological domestication of Vivian: her transformation into an acceptable figure within the norms of upper-class respectability is contingent upon the intervention of Edward, whose wealth facilitates her re-styling and who acts as a mentor, protector, and ultimately, redeemer<sup>30</sup>. In this sense, the final act translates class asymmetry into narrative closure, where upward mobility appears to result from personal charm rather than systemic change.

## 5.2. CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES AND GENDERED REPRESENTATION

From its opening scenes, *Pretty Woman* mobilizes the grammar of the male gaze, as theorized by Laura Mulvey (1975). Vivian is introduced not through dialogue or psychological depth, but through a visual fragmentation of her body—legs, lingerie, high heels—emphasizing her sexual availability and aesthetic appeal. A clear example appears in the film’s initial shots, which frame her lower body in close-up: first her lingerie-clad torso (fig. 1), then her thigh-high boots (fig. 2). Her face appears only later, subordinated to the erotic framing that defines her initial identity in the eyes of the viewer. This mode of representation

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<sup>29</sup> See also Cojoracu (2016), Ellis et al. (1986) and Jemison (2021) for different feminist and sociological perspectives on the regulation, representation, and theorization of sex work.

<sup>30</sup> This transformation recalls the myth of Pygmalion, in which a male figure shapes the ideal woman through his gaze and control. See Rueda (1999) and Rodríguez (2010) for a detailed discussion of this myth’s literary and cinematic adaptations.

renders her a visual object rather than a subject with agency. Significantly, some of these early shots—particularly those that fragment her body and conceal her face—were reportedly performed by a body double chosen to better conform to prevailing beauty standards. A similar logic informs the film's promotional poster, in which Roberts' legs were digitally elongated and her waist reduced to heighten her sexual appeal. Such aesthetic decisions exemplify Mulvey's concept of *scopophilic pleasure*—the eroticized visual consumption of the female body designed for an implicit male viewer<sup>31</sup>.

By emphasizing Vivian's physical attributes prior to presenting her voice, thoughts, or social context, the film reinforces the prioritization of bodily spectacle over narrative complexity. This cinematic strategy of fragmentation finds a striking parallel in the literary tradition of the *blason*, a Renaissance poetic convention that dissects and idealizes the female body part by part: golden hair, alabaster neck, ruby lips, ivory breasts<sup>32</sup>. In this tradition, the woman is not described as a unified subject but as a catalogue of erotic attributes, arranged for male admiration. As Taccini, Laguna Mariscal, and Martínez Sariago (2024, p. 95) point out, this *topos*, known in its idealized form as *blason*, was codified by Petrarch in the *Rime sparse* and widely disseminated across European lyric traditions.

Just as the *blason* transforms the woman into a stylized surface for contemplation—stripped of voice, agency, and social identity—*Pretty Woman* presents Vivian as a spectacle composed of isolated, aestheticized parts. The viewer is invited to consume her visually long before she speaks or acts. In both instances, the female body is eroticized and simultaneously fragmented: divided, arranged, and aesthetically presented to align with masculine expectations of desire. The film thus perpetuates a longstanding cultural logic that normalizes the objectification of women through established codes of beauty, elegance, and sexual availability.

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<sup>31</sup> This dynamic has also been addressed in feminist debates on pornography. Longino (1980), for instance, argues that the visual representation of women's bodies often functions as a form of symbolic oppression, reinforcing patriarchal norms under the guise of sexual liberation.

<sup>32</sup> For a definition of *blason* as "a Renaissance convention that describes the lady as a series of parts," see Rabin (1994, p. 91). Cf. Taccini, Laguna Mariscal & Martínez Sariago (2024, p. 95).

This dynamic is further reinforced by the *mise-en-scène*, where lighting, camera angles, and costume choices position Vivian explicitly as an object of visual consumption. Even the film’s marketing materials—such as the digitally altered poster—reveal the commodifying gaze at work. As Mulvey has argued, classical narrative cinema often renders women as passive bearers of meaning, while men serve as active agents of narrative progression and visual control. *Pretty Woman* exemplifies this structure with precision, aligning femininity with erotic display and masculinity with agency, authority, and narrative resolution.

FIGURE 1. Vivian’s body in lingerie (I). *Pretty Woman* (1990).



FIGURE 2. Vivian’s body in lingerie (II). *Pretty Woman* (1990).

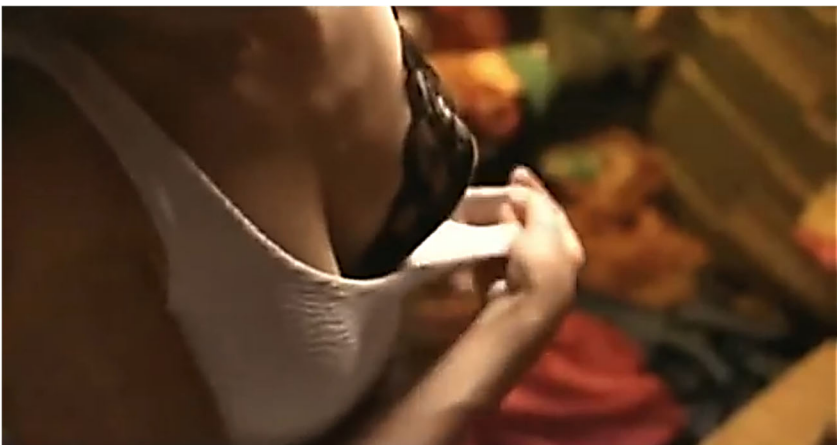


FIGURE 3. Vivian's thigh-high boots. *Pretty Woman* (1990).



Edward, by contrast, is portrayed as rational, composed, and emotionally reserved—a figure of control and economic power—. His ability to “rescue” Vivian is not merely financial but symbolic: through him, she gains legitimacy. The scenes in which he takes her shopping, hires a hotel manager to instruct her in etiquette, and invites her to the opera all participate in a Pygmalion-like logic, in which the male gaze does not just eroticize, but also civilizes<sup>33</sup>.

The dynamic is not reciprocal. While Vivian ostensibly transforms Edward by offering him emotional openness, this change is minor compared to her own, which involves aesthetic, behavioural, and even aspirational redefinition. Her admission that “people put you down enough, you start to believe it” reveals the internalization of social judgment—a wound that is healed not through self-affirmation but through male validation—.

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<sup>33</sup> This pedagogical variant of the Pygmalion myth—in which the male figure instructs, refines, and elevates the woman—has been examined as a recurring structure in modern cultural narratives. For a discussion of its ideological implications and Enlightenment roots, see Coulet (1998) and Martínez Sariago (2012).

### 5.3. THE CINDERELLA SCHEME

*Pretty Woman* operates as a textbook case of what Balló and Pérez (1995, pp. 193-207) identify as the Cinderella scheme: an upward social trajectory enabled by romance and sealed by the prince's arrival. This model reproduces a cultural fantasy of female elevation through love rather than structural transformation. Vivian's metamorphosis is not the result of challenging the conditions of her marginality, but of being chosen. Her worth is validated by Edward's gaze and consolidated through consumer rituals—luxury shopping, refined leisure, and eventual access to a more respectable domestic space—.

The film adheres closely to the structural logic of the Cinderella plot (Tvtropes, n. d.), with precise narrative analogies. Like Cinderella, Vivian is marked by the absence of parental figures—she is estranged from her mother and lacks any stable support network. The hotel manager plays a discreet but pivotal role as the “fairy godmother”, guiding Vivian through basic etiquette and facilitating her transformation with the help of designer clothing. This makeover replaces magic with luxury fashion. The visit to the opera serves as a public rite of passage, echoing the royal ball as a setting where Vivian is briefly accepted into high society. After this experience, she returns to her modest apartment, much like Cinderella returning home at midnight. The final scene—Edward arriving in a white limousine bearing flowers—restages the prince's quest, with the limousine as the modern carriage and the penthouse as the palace. These structural echoes reinforce the narrative's ideological core: social mobility and female fulfillment are framed not as the product of autonomy, but as a reward for romantic acceptability.

The fantasy of male salvation permeates the film. Edward embodies the benevolent saviour who not only recognizes Vivian's emotional depth but also offers her a path to redemption, displacing any structural critique of the socioeconomic factors that led her to sex work. As Campbell (2006) points out, the trope of the “love story prostitute” functions as a recurring narrative device in cinema, where the sex worker becomes a romantic heroine whose past is redeemed not through social or structural change, but through the emotional validation of heterosexual love.

This trope neutralizes the stigma surrounding sex work by framing it within the conventions of romantic fantasy.

The closing sequence —Edward’s arrival in a white limousine to “rescue” Vivian from her apartment (figs. 3–4)— offers a fantasy resolution that replicates the iconic carriage scene from the fairy tale, while concealing the material precarity and coercion that often define the realities of prostitution. The narrative neutralizes conflict by offering romantic attachment as resolution, sidelining the broader context of economic and gendered constraints.

As Álvarez Castaño (2020) notes, *Pretty Woman* embodies a contemporary rewriting of the Cinderella myth. In his comparison with the Spanish play *Alta seducción*, he identifies a shared narrative logic: the symbolic elevation of a marginalized woman through the affection and wealth of a socially dominant man. Far from disrupting traditional gender hierarchies, these plots reaffirm them under the guise of romantic transformation, while simultaneously masking the economic and symbolic inequalities that condition the female experience.

FIGURE 4. Edward’s arrival in the final scene, a direct visual echo of the Cinderella carriage motif in *Pretty Woman* (1990) (I)



FIGURE 5. Edward's arrival in the final scene, a direct visual echo of the Cinderella carriage motif in *Pretty Woman* (1990) (II)



## 6. CONTRASTING CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF PROSTITUTION: ARCHETYPES, NARRATIVES, AND IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS

### 6.1. CINEMATIC ARCHETYPES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF PROSTITUTES

Campbell (2006) provides an exhaustive typology of prostitute characters in cinema, categorizing them broadly into two main groups: the victim, typically characterized by oppression, suffering, and tragedy; and the rebel, portrayed as independent, empowered, or morally ambiguous. Within these broad categories, Campbell identifies specific subtypes such as the Captive, the Martyr, the Siren, the Gold Digger, the Happy Hooker, and the Love Story prostitute, among others (Table 1).

TABLE 1. *Typology of Prostitute Archetypes in Cinema*

<b>Victim</b>	<b>Rebel</b>	<b>Mixture</b>
<i>The Captive</i>	<i>The Siren</i>	<i>The Avenger</i>
<i>The Martyr</i>	<i>The Gold Digger</i>	<i>The Love Story</i>
<i>The Junkie</i>	<i>The Happy Hooker</i>	<i>The Gigolette</i>
<i>The Comrade</i>	<i>The Adventuress</i>	
<i>The Nursemaid</i>	<i>The Working Girl</i>	
<i>The Baby Doll</i>		

Source: Campbell (2006)

Historically, the figure of the prostitute has offered filmmakers an appealing narrative subject, due to its inherent dramatic potential and symbolic richness. These archetypes have served to channel contrasting ideological functions—either romanticizing prostitution as a site of empowerment and freedom, or portraying it as a symptom of social decay and moral failure. Films such as *Irma La Douce* (Billy Wilder, 1963), *Pretty Baby* (Louis Malle, 1978), *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971), and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) exemplify this spectrum. In Wilder’s *Irma La Douce*, the protagonist embodies the “happy hooker” archetype, and prostitution is framed as a whimsical, almost liberating profession that affords both sexual and economic agency. This idealized portrayal contrasts sharply with the bleak vision of *Taxi Driver*, where prostitution is equated with degradation, exploitation, and the collapse of moral order in urban America (Sinclair, 1988, pp. 148–155).

Campbell’s typology undoubtedly provides a valuable framework for identifying recurring patterns in the cinematic portrayal of sex workers. However, its applicability is not without caveats. Rooted largely in Western—particularly American and European—film traditions, the model leaves little room for alternative representations that may emerge in non-Western or independent cinemas. Moreover, by assigning sex worker characters to fixed narrative roles, such as the victim or the romantic heroine, the taxonomy risks flattening their complexity and obscuring the specific socio-cultural contexts that shape their depiction.

These archetypes, while analytically useful, should be approached not as definitive categories but as discursive devices that serve particular

ideological purposes within the narrative economy of film. Their persistence across decades suggests not merely aesthetic convenience, but a broader cultural investment in simplifying—or romanticizing—a social reality marked by economic inequality, gendered power imbalances, and structural violence.

Rather than offering nuanced or varied portrayals, these cinematic figures often reinforce social attitudes: either by glamorizing prostitution as a path to empowerment or love, or by reducing it to a moral cautionary tale. In both cases, the effect is the same: the complex realities of prostitution are displaced by comforting fictions that align with dominant cultural fantasies.

## 6.2. SOCIOECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS AND THE NARRATIVE OF ENTRY INTO PROSTITUTION

In cinematic narratives, the prostitute's backstory frequently emphasizes poverty, trauma, or familial dysfunction as primary motivational factors. Films such as *Pretty Baby* (1978) and *Diary of a Lost Girl* (G. W. Pabst, 1929) exemplify this trope, portraying prostitution as an almost inevitable consequence of personal trauma, sexual abuse, or parental neglect. *Pretty Baby*, for instance, depicts Violet (Brooke Shields) growing up in a brothel, framing her later entry into prostitution as predetermined by her social environment (Sinclair, 1988, pp. 146–148). Similarly, in *Diary of a Lost Girl*, Thymian's descent into prostitution follows sexual assault and social rejection, presenting sex work as a direct consequence of patriarchal violence and moral hypocrisy. While these narratives foreground structural inequalities, they often reframe them as private misfortunes—shifting attention away from systemic failures and onto individual suffering.

The recurring absence—or dysfunction—of maternal figures in films depicting prostitution is not merely a narrative coincidence; it points instead to a deeper cultural tendency to portray structural issues as personal deficits. In *Pretty Woman*, Vivian's estrangement from her mother is mentioned briefly yet operates implicitly as an explanation for her vulnerability. The missing maternal bond subtly positions her entry into

prostitution as a consequence of individual inadequacy rather than systemic inequities, simplifying a complex social reality into a neat emotional backstory.

### 6.3. ROMANTICIZING AND ERASING: HOLLYWOOD'S SANITIZED PORTRAYAL OF PROSTITUTION

Hollywood has consistently represented prostitution through romantic fantasy, substituting sentimentality for social critique. *Pretty Woman* stands as perhaps the clearest illustration, transforming sex work from an experience of exploitation into a romantic vehicle for upward social mobility. Vivian's progression from street prostitute to romantic heroine relies on aesthetic idealization, effectively erasing the economic hardship and social stigma typically endured by women in similar contexts.

Other films adopt a more discreet but equally problematic strategy. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), the protagonist's status as a call girl is largely implied rather than stated. Holly Golightly becomes a style icon, her transactional relationships reframed through the glamorous codes of fashion and flirtation. Here too, sexual commodification is made palatable through charm and romance.

These portrayals are not politically neutral. By recasting prostitution as a voluntary, glamorous, or empowering experience, they help sustain cultural myths that obscure its structural violence. In doing so, they shift attention away from questions of inequality, coercion, and gendered vulnerability, inviting the audience to feel rather than to question. By replacing harsh realities —violence, poverty, trafficking, coercion— with narrative arcs of individual redemption or economic mobility, these films reinforce neoliberal narratives of personal agency, choice, and consumerist aspiration.

A striking example of this sanitized portrayal appears in a brief but telling exchange between Vivian and her friend Kit, the character who introduced her to sex work. When Kit suggests they might need to find a pimp to attract more clients, Vivian protests: "He'll run our lives and take our money." Kit replies confidently: "You're right. We say who, we say when, and we say how much." (fig. 6).

FIGURE 6. Kit and Vivian discussing the possibility of finding a pimp. *Pretty Woman* (1990).



This dialogue crystallizes the illusion of autonomy that the film attributes to sex workers, presenting prostitution as a space of self-determination and control. Yet, in most real-world contexts, such an agency is structurally undermined by economic precarity, gendered power dynamics, and various forms of coercion.

Instead of representing the genuine experiences of sex workers, this scene promotes a neoliberal illusion of personal agency under conditions of systemic limitation.

#### 6.4. CONSEQUENCES AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF CINEMATIC NARRATIVES

The impact of these cinematic portrayals extends significantly beyond entertainment. By romanticizing prostitution, such films shape collective imagination and influence public perceptions of the sex industry, often concealing the structural violence at its core. As Cobo (2017) and Dalla (2006) have shown, cinematic myths surrounding prostitution distort social attitudes and weaken political responses to critical issues like sex trafficking, exploitation, and gender-based violence.

The enduring cultural myth of the prostitute empowered—or

redeemed—through romantic or economic salvation effectively sidelines systemic critique and hinders substantial intervention. Rather than challenging the *status quo*, that is, the socioeconomic and patriarchal structures responsible for sexual commodification, these narratives uphold existing power relations, legitimizing gendered and economic inequalities within sentimental or eroticized frameworks. In this sense, cinema functions not merely as a vehicle for entertainment, but as an ideological apparatus capable of normalizing and even glamorizing exploitation.

#### 6.5. TOWARDS CRITICAL REPRESENTATION: ALTERNATIVE CINEMATIC APPROACHES

In contrast to mainstream portrayals, certain films offer more critical and complex representations of prostitution, refusing both glamorization and moral redemption. Works such as *Lilya 4-ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002) and *Stella Does Tricks* (Coky Giedroyc, 1996) confront the structural realities underpinning sex work—trafficking, poverty, gendered violence—, thus offering a counter-narrative to Hollywood’s sentimental treatment.

*Lilya 4-ever* offers one of the starkest cinematic portrayals of sexual exploitation and trafficking in recent decades. Unlike mainstream films that cushion the subject with romance or redemption, Moodysson’s work refuses any form of narrative comfort. The protagonist’s path into prostitution is not framed as choice or misfortune, but as the result of systemic abandonment and manipulation. This refusal to aestheticize suffering forces the viewer into an uneasy confrontation with the psychological and material brutality at the core of the sex trade.

Any serious analysis of how cinema represents prostitution must go beyond plot summaries or visual styles. It demands close attention to the ideological assumptions embedded in narrative form, character construction, and aesthetic choices—and to the political discourses these representations reinforce or challenge.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has examined *Pretty Woman* (1990) as a paradigmatic case of how mainstream cinema reconfigures prostitution through the narrative and symbolic framework of the Cinderella myth. By embedding sex work within a structure of romantic rescue and aesthetic transformation, the film turns a condition of social vulnerability into a tale of personal fulfilment, love, and aspiration. Rather than addressing the material and symbolic inequalities that underpin prostitution, the story reframes them as the backdrop for a redemptive fantasy, where beauty, charm, and emotional availability open the gates to a better life.

The persistent use of archetypes such as the “happy hooker” or the “redeemed prostitute” simplifies complex realities into familiar cultural scripts. These narrative patterns replace structural analysis with personal transformation, social critique with emotional consolation, and injustice with individual redemption. The makeover, the shopping spree, the opera, and the white limousine are not merely aesthetic episodes—they constitute the grammar through which the film articulates its vision of upward mobility, one in which the female protagonist is absorbed into a world she does not transform but learns to inhabit.

Far from questioning prevailing social norms, *Pretty Woman* subtly reaffirms them. The film acknowledges inequality, but treats it as a personal obstacle that can be overcome through charm, romantic attachment, and male intervention. Rather than confronting structural injustice, it reframes dependence as a form of desirability and rewards submission with emotional and material compensation. Its seductive appeal lies precisely in that: in how it dresses up social asymmetry as a love story, inviting the viewer to embrace contradiction rather than interrogate it.

In the end, *Pretty Woman* does not so much interrogate the conditions surrounding prostitution as it reframes them within a grammar of intimacy, refinement, and personal reward. The narrative bypasses structural questions in favour of affective resolution, transforming exclusion into elegance and dependence into narrative desirability. What remains,

therefore, is not a rupture with conventional scripts, but their reconfiguration in updated forms. The film confirms the resilience of familiar myths —not by reproducing them verbatim, but by adapting them to the aesthetic and emotional expectations of late twentieth-century audiences. It is precisely this subtle rearticulation of the fairy tale —and its capacity to overwrite material contradictions with symbolic compensation— that secures its cultural longevity and, perhaps, its most enduring ambiguities.

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