Pretty in Poverty

Known for the bright neon colors, big and bouncy hair, and loud patterns, the 1980s introduced consumerism with a bang. Teenage culture quickly adopted the shopping mall into their daily lives to earn independence from their conservative parents. Prompted by this transition, films began to portray their characters in the confines of malls and high schools. John Hughes, an iconic film writer of the 1980s, depicted the average lives of teenagers through their high school tales. In one of his most successful films, *Pretty in Pink*, the exuberant lifestyles of teenagers in the 1980s influenced a twist on the class-centered plot line. Actively portraying a traditional plot concerned with clashing classes, the film not only set the precedent for teen film plots following its release, but also ushered in a cult following. Coinciding with such cultural influence, *Pretty in Pink* also utilizes classical romance film plots to create an impact on its audience. Therefore, the inspiration from the conservative economic and political policies of the 1980s enables the major social concern of class to take priority as the central plot in *Pretty in Pink* as well as altering the function and structure of future teenage films.

*Pretty in Pink* describes the life of Andie Walsh, played by Molly Ringwald, a girl from the lower side of the tracks as she attends a mostly upper class high school. Labeled an outcast by the arrogant “richies” through her thrift store clothing and working class background, Andie’s identity becomes defined by her class status. In true John Hughes fashion, the iconic writer details the daily struggles of the heroine and her love interests through their catty high school setting. Both “richie” and sensitive Blane and Andie’s quirky best friend Duckie, played by
Andrew McCarthy and Jon Cryer respectively, vie for her love. Throughout the film, Andie’s internal conflict with choosing the wealthy boy or her childhood best friend reflects her external struggles with the pressures of living in a clash between classes.

The portrayal of Andie’s working class background displays the blatantly present focus on class structure in the film. A camera traveling through her neighborhood, introduces Andie’s lifestyle, with a street cleaner and railroad tracks. According to Timothy Shary, a leading writer in representing youth in film, class differences almost immediately become distinct through “classic signifiers” (“Buying Me Love” 565). Without witnessing Andie’s routine, the audience already experiences her wealth status due to these signifiers of a lower class neighborhood. Once she comes into view, she yells for her father to wake, displaying her independent attitude as well as her responsibility for her father. Mourning his dead wife, Andie’s father remains unemployed, leaving Andie to take responsibility for his actions. To Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, a professor of film, cultural, and women’s studies, a “maternal melodrama” provides a blank character with little to hide and a strong degree of independence within any teenage film (42). Andie’s struggle as a part of the working class not only characterizes the plot, but also becomes her personality as she expands out of that class. Per Ann De Vaney, author of a book discussing Pretty in Pink, the film borrows from old Hollywood tactics on the absentee mother causing sympathy toward the heroine (209). Working in a record store near a shopping mall, Andie distances herself from her negligent father as she earns financial stability without relying on another. Anthony C. Bleach, a professor of media and film studies, discusses Andie’s position as “primary breadwinner” in her family as she attempts to distance herself both physically and financially from her father’s habits (42). Her financial status acts as a catalyst for Andie to work while maintaining a friendship with the owner, Iona. According to Timothy Shary, such characters have career goals that exceed others because of their drive to rise above their current conditions (Generation Multiplex 33-34).
Immediately setting Andie up with a desire to separate herself from her current status, her eventual relationship with Blane becomes more realistic. Also displaying her independence, Andie strays from traditional working class jobs, such as a factory, in favor of a record store in which she can express her creativity through her uniform and the people she encounters. Therefore, these characteristics of a working class background all distinctly determine both Andie’s class status and her attitude toward her status.

The portrayal of the “richies” in the film showcases the contrast between the two conflicting classes. The three main “richies” introduced are Blane, Andie’s love interest, Steff, Blane’s arrogant friend, and Benny, the conceited mean girl. The first signifier of their wealth, clothing, causes their class to be easily recognizable. According to the film’s costume designer, Marilyn Vance, in a *Huffington Post* article, their clothing contains elements of J. Crew, featuring linens in light, carefree colors (Capewell 5). The high quality appearance of their costumes distinctly displays their separation from that of Andie’s and Duckie’s clothing as they exude power and serve as a source of intimidation. To Paula Marantz Cohen, an English professor as well as an author of books and essays on film and culture, the “wealth of things available for self-expression,” not the wealth itself, influences Andie’s desire to emulate the “richies” (86). Blane’s aloof attitude and his lack of awareness for their differing classes and Andie’s struggles demonstrates his ability to act without thought. In turn, Blane disregards his wealth and attends Steff’s house party with Andie, despite her refusals. As Shary notes in *Generation Multiplex*, family expectations cause a disjunction between the “richies” and the outcasts; the lack of a parental appearance displays the sense of entitlement in the “richies” (215). While they may be rich, they feel more isolation from the rest of their high school as they have no responsibilities and no visible parents. Held to a higher expectation to maintain their class, the “richies” resort to influencing fellow upper-class students to reject the lower class, as
Steff does with Blane (“Buying Me Love” 566). Serving as a reminder of Andie’s outsider perspective and the villains in her relationship, the “richies” continue the ever-present conflict of class in the plot of *Pretty in Pink*.

As demonstrated by the “richies” clothing influencing their characters, Andie’s clothing and overall style contribute to her distinction as a lower class. Immediately introducing Andie’s standout style in the first scene, the film displays how Andie’s clothes promote her personality as well as how she wears them (Cohen 84). Quirky combinations of florals, layers, and bowler hats stand out amongst the airy pastel clothes of the “richies” and contribute to her individuality. Andie and Duckie utilize the little resources available within their price range to create such ensembles, emulating their attempts to mask their lower class through loud patterns and layers (Capewell 5). As for Andie’s now iconic prom dress, the shift shape, neckline, and bright pink color separate her from the pastel colors and full skirts the “richies” wear. Physically sewing fabric from Iona’s dress and Andie’s mother’s dress, she transforms into a combination of both classes at the climax of the film (Bleach 40). Through her dress, Andie demonstrates her strength following the breakup with Blane, as she accepts her lower class status while appearing at an upper class event. Although Andie’s style garnered admirers following the film’s release, it sent confusing messages on the attainability of the upper class. Advertising individuality through her clothing, Andie’s style distinctly denounces “richie” trends and a social climber attitude, when in reality, teenagers aim to climb the social ladder. However, *Pretty in Pink* remains a shift in style during the 1980s as teenagers began to integrate layers and florals into their style (Capewell 5). According to Andrew McCarthy, the actor behind Blane, in an interview about the relevance of *Pretty in Pink*, the film appears to describe a “girl making a dress and wanting to go to a dance,” but McCarthy later realizes that Andie’s independence and style continues to influence that era of teenagers thirty years after the film’s release (The A.V. Club). Although Andie’s clothing
demonstrates her lower class and creative means, her ability to display her own style despite her budget contributes to the cultural influence of *Pretty in Pink*.

The use of the makeover motif inspired by previous plots displays Andie’s transformation from outcast to upper class. First evident in the story of Cinderella, the evolution from lower class to upper class via a romantic relationship made its way into films due to the inspiring achievement of the heroine. According to Thomas E. Wartenberg, Cinderella, a maid in her own household, discovers a prince and attends his ball after magically changing her clothes into a ball gown (74). However, when discovered to be disguising as a higher class through a glass slipper, her stepmother locks her away until she escapes to find the prince searching for her shoe size. The Cinderella tale demonstrates a belief in social hierarchy due to the promise of reparation (Wartenberg 76). In this, Andie follows Blane to the parking lot after prom because she believes her pink prom dress has altered his attitude. Using the makeover as a proxy, Andie enters a new social class as she combines two differing classes into a dress (Bleach 40). Despite already establishing her own style, Andie conforms to the material aspect of the “richies” by altering her attitude toward prom and Blane’s attitude toward dating a lower class. Andie’s sudden transformation causes Duckie to remain her friend and accept her relationship with Blane as well as Blane defying Steff to accept Andie. However, the original ending of the film challenges this Cinderella tale as Andie and Duckie reunite to defy the “richies” at prom (“Buying Me Love” 572). Immediately disliked by test audiences, the ending was altered to include the perfect Cinderella ending with Andie and Blane ignoring their class confines. Evident in previous films, Hughes continues the trend of transforming a smart and awkward character into a popular and sophisticated heroine, later taking over 1980s film (*Generation Multiplex* 40). Also contributing to the effectiveness of this motif throughout the decade, *Pretty in Pink* introduces a modern twist on altering class through the “bonding potential of working women” (Bleach 42). Expanding
from the monotony of the Cinderella tale, Andie displays her independence through holding a job and dictating her own transformation. While the makeover theme appears in nearly every teenage romance, *Pretty in Pink* offers a refreshing reconstruction on the representation of class transformations.

Released in 1986, *Pretty in Pink* reflects the political and economic climates of that era as well as the influence of using class as a plot as seen in previous films. Initially borrowing from the long withstanding class-clashing plot, *Pretty in Pink* weaves in new elements to modernize the trope. According to Shary, Hollywood always displays a soft spot for the lower class, often portraying their unrealistic rise to wealth (“Buying Me Love” 564). In the film, Andie follows these same guidelines through defying her class to date Blane, establishing herself as the heroine. Often producing confusing messages on class mobility, Hollywood embraces an upward mobility while discouraging reaching out of one’s own class (Foster 13). By borrowing themes from classic Hollywood and combining elements from the 1980s, the film describes Andie’s internal struggle between staying complacent or expanding out of her class. Coming from an era of “residual gloom” and “financial woes” in the 1970s, films in the new decade set out to reflect those elements while creating a fantasy for the audience (“Buying Me Love” 563). Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 greatly influenced the class divide contained in *Pretty in Pink*, as his conservative values appeared to benefit the rich, further harming the reputation of the lower classes. Known as Reaganomics, his policies encouraged upward mobility and endorsed class divide (“Buying Me Love” 563). Serving the interests of rich conservatives, Reagan’s policies came to define Hollywood blockbusters in order to sell tickets. Also influenced by a rise in teen pregnancies, teen films strayed from overtly sexual films and marketed toward a romantic relationship (*Generation Multiplex* 211). Following the market of teens, film companies and writers, like John Hughes, produced films that reflected the current attitude of their audience.
Conservatives embraced the use of films such as *Pretty in Pink* that “[gave] way to a growing realization of class struggle” (563). While the plot of the film supports the economic and political policies set in motion, Molly Ringwald’s character defies the expectations. She remains the heroine surpassing her lower class, as evident in previous Hollywood films, but remains characterized by her class. Her desire to no longer experience a class divide is counteracted by her strong friendships with Iona and Duckie. Although *Pretty in Pink* displays strong elements of the 1980s economic policies, it maintains the same formulaic plot line of many films preceding it.

Following the release of *Pretty in Pink*, the use of class as a plot line and the elements used to portray class inspired teenage romance films as well as leaving a lasting impression on 1980s culture. Employed as a heroine who navigates class divides, Andie remains the main reason *Pretty in Pink* retains relevance (Bleach 26). Her ability to defy class status and continue her relationship with Blane inspired that generation of teenagers to grow independent of their class confines. The expanding amount of individuality expressed by the film increased the use of strong willed heroines in cinema as well as in advertising. Employed by clothing companies, clothes came to supply others with identity signifiers based upon appearance, warranting a class identity (Wartenberg 77). Since Hughes’s portrayal, however, the character of the outcast and nerd has become more complicated leading into the 1990s as the characters grow self aware of the fallacy of fitting a mold to be popular (*Generation Multiplex* 40). Fragmenting clothing identifiers further, easily distinguishable classes turned impossible to place in films. This caused audiences to dissipate from theaters due to the lack of representation. In order to entice audiences back into theaters, film companies created complex characters that experienced more difficult topics than the fantasy of high school portrayed in the 1980s (*Generation Multiplex* 216). Characters in later films took the inspiration of *Pretty in Pink* to describe films grounded in
reality. While Andie dealt with discrimination based on her class, her happy ending enveloped
the fantasy of the 1980s. This “excessive emphasis” on class declined in popularity following the
John Hughes era, due to his repetitive plots losing social and financial momentum (“Buying Me
Love” 578-79). While his films were box-office hits, evolving social statuses and economic
policies made centralized plots based on class difficult to finance and describe accurately.
However, Andie’s status as a working woman created the opportunity for later films to appeal to
the working class through strong characters rather than portraying them for sympathy. Despite
the progress Andie’s job presents, it encourages the premise of an upper class status given to
young viewers without the work to achieve it. Instead teenagers, like Andie, are handed the
opportunity (Bleach 44). Therefore, Pretty in Pink’s influence over the portrayal of class in films
following its release created backlash due to its superficial tendencies in the expectations of a
heroine’s appearance and lack of reality in her ascension to the upper class.

While Pretty in Pink attempts to modernize a plot concerned with class, the outcome of
such a teenage romance film remains predictable in that the titular characters defy the odds to
maintain their relationship. Thirty years following the release of the film, teenagers continue to
flood theaters for monotonous romance films despite knowing the ending. Has the hope for a
twist on the typical plot drawn in audiences to see the next release or has the predictability of the
outcome caused the intrigue? Certainly, the fear of the unknown draws audiences in for the same
plot as the unexpected aspect comes from how the couple ends up together. In this same vein,
film plots reveal the judgment of class in reality. Breaking away from a specific class remains
discouraged while others remain in the same class due to the lack of information about the
outcome. Perhaps, as creatures of habit, audiences continue the same routine and fall for the
same plot because the ease of predictability allows them to escape potential judgment for
reaching beyond their limits.
Works Cited


